

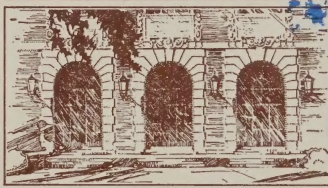
Cat-in-the-Manger

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CAT-IN-THE-MANGER

BY
PHYLLIS E. WATLEY
AUTHOR OF "THE CATS"

CAT-IN-THE-MANGER

LONDON
HIGGINS & JACKSON, LTD.
1, ABchurch Lane, LONDON, E.C. 4
1931

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BY

PHYLLIS E. BENTLEY

AUTHOR OF "ENVIRONMENT"

LONDON

SIDGWICK & JACKSON, LTD.

3 ADAM STREET, ADELPHI, W.C. 2

1923

CAT-IN-THE-MANGER

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PHYLIS E. BENTLEY

AUTHOR OF "THE MOUNTAIN"

LONDON

STODGWICK & JACKSON, LTD.

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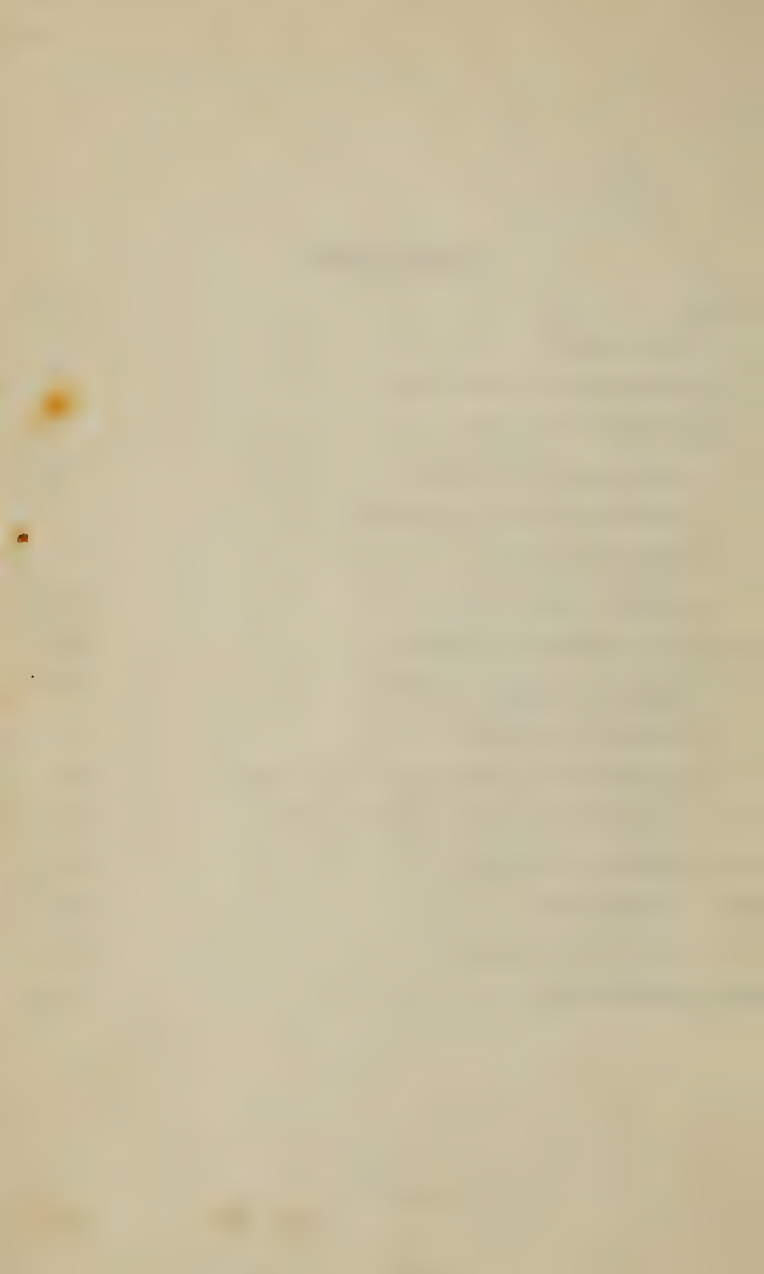
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CAT-IN-THE-MANGER

CHAPTER I *THE EGOIST*

1.

BERTHA kicked open the dining-room door impatiently with her foot, and put the bowl of flowers she was carrying down on the table with an angry thump.

“Thank goodness that’s done!” she muttered.

The red and gold nasturtiums which curled over the edges of the black china bowl, or stood upright between their light green hexagonal leaves, formed a pleasing and harmonious splash of colour in the sombre brown-upholstered dining-room, but their beauty did not appeal to Bertha. She had a native contempt for flowers which “grew” as opposed to flowers which were sold in shops. It is true that the environs of that West Riding manufacturing town Hudley do not abound in wild flowers, but if the surrounding hills and dales had been covered with blossoms Bertha would have scorned them. One was obliged to have flowers in the house, of course, because everyone had flowers, and the rooms looked bare without them; and Bertha was well practised in the selection of expensive cut flowers for the dinner table or the drawing-room. She had therefore a certain amount of admiration for carnations and hydrangeas and other such expensive blooms, regarding them as an indication of wealth in their possessor, but she considered it a sordid and disgraceful economy to pick flowers from one’s own garden and use them in the house as she had done that afternoon at her mother’s bidding. The belated nastur-

tiums were beneath her contempt. Besides, their glowing russet hues did not suit Bertha's style of beauty; delicate shades of pink or blue or fawn displayed to the best advantage Bertha's dark waving hair, pale oval face, and dark long-lashed eyes.

Bertha was proud of her prettiness: she strove to make her dark eyes look gloomy and mysterious, cultivated the particular smiles which revealed her dimple, and tried every cosmetic available in the vain effort to remove the faint powdering of fawn-coloured freckles which lay across the bridge of her nose. Indeed, her prettiness was her *raison d'être*; were she bereft of it there would be no Bertha left. Yet she was twenty-six and unmarried. She had made up her mind to remedy this last defect, which to be sure was not her fault; a certain girlish capriciousness had perhaps been allowed to have too much weight in her counsels, but she strove, and had always striven hard, to please men.

She washed her hands free from the débris of the nasturtiums, and went upstairs into the former nursery with a faint colour on her usually pale face. On the table lay a length of delicate material in soft sheeny folds. Bertha took it up gently and caressingly, and fingered it with a loving touch until she found her needle. She had been interrupted in her sewing by her mother's command to "do" the flowers. Now she sat down in a rocking-chair and resumed her work with a sigh of content; the beauty of soft delicate lingerie was a beauty which Bertha could appreciate, and she desired greatly to finish this garment so that she might wear it that night.

From her seat Bertha could see out of the window the gardens of Beech Lea, her father's solid mansion, lying still and airless under a grey October mist. The surviving geraniums in the tall plaster pots by the steps were wet and draggled, the speckled lilioms had a haggard look; the rhododendrons' shiny leaves, black with the smoke of Hudley's mills, drooped mournfully with the stiff angularity peculiar to their species.

Bertha and her mother were alone in the house (except of course for the three maids). The head of the household, William West, Esquire, Justice of the Peace and ex-Mayor of Hudley, was attending a committee meeting in the neighbouring city of Bradford. Of the large and flourishing family which had once filled the house, one sister and two brothers were married, and one brother was dead; and Bertha's eldest sister, Gladys, a thoroughly dowdy, good-hearted girl who was approaching the forties, was at present away on a visit to a cousin in London.

Bertha rather hoped that her father's meeting would keep him in Bradford for the greater part of the evening, because William Henry Irwell was coming in to see Mr. West on chapel business that night, and Bertha intended to marry William Henry Irwell, and believed she could do it, too, if she were only given a chance. But her chances were not many, for William Irwell was thirty-five years old and did not mix much with Bertha's friends, who were younger. He danced, it is true, but not very frequently; he played golf but not tennis, and Bertha was a poor and unenthusiastic golfer; he did not like music, but he often visited the theatre, whereas Mr. West often took his family to concerts and never to the theatre—Bertha, who doted on this form of entertainment, was obliged to secure the reluctant Gladys or one of her much-occupied sisters-in-law as her chaperon when she wished to indulge in it. William Irwell liked bridge, and so did Bertha; but with no brothers at home it was difficult to ask him to the house often, especially as Mrs. West and Gladys played cards abominably.

If only Bertha had had a brother living at home! She felt a passing spasm of what was almost annoyance against her youngest brother, Fred, for having perished in Gallipoli.

"If it had been Arthur," she thought bitterly, "it wouldn't have mattered."

William Henry Irwell lived not far from the Wests in a very fine house—finer than Mr. West's—called Beech

Holm. (Every terrace, lane, and house in that district of Hudley had "Beech" as part of its name, and the resulting confusion amongst strangers and new postmen was pitiable.) He lived with his mother, who was a widow, and with his younger brother, who was lame and delicate and a solicitor. William himself owned a spinning mill in Hudley, which one would have thought was big enough to keep him occupied; but it was not so: he had a cloth-manufacturing place in Bradford, and another small weaving shed "up the valley" from Hudley, and innumerable interests in other business concerns. Everything he touched seemed to pay, as it had done for his father before him; and bachelor uncles on both sides of the family had obligingly left their money to William and his brother Ernest, so that it was commonly supposed in Hudley that William Henry Irwell was worth anything between a quarter and half a million. Yet he was not a fortunate man. He had married some ten years ago the eldest daughter of Sir Melfield Huntley, Hudley's only baronet. Violet Huntley was fair-haired, fluffy, extraordinarily fascinating, and extraordinarily devoid of common sense. Indeed, most women said that she was "perhaps not quite responsible," but her air of beauty and fashion and her subtle femininity had a profound attraction for most men. During the war Violet eloped with an officer who was stationed in the neighbourhood. No blame whatever attached to William in the matter. He had not neglected his wife and he had denied her nothing; her tastes were the same as his own, and he had gratified them abundantly. Sir Melfield followed his daughter and found her. She declined to return; divorce proceedings presently followed, and the officer then married her. William Irwell sold every stick of furniture he had, and also disposed of his house, and went back to live with his mother and Ernest, to the latter of whom he was devoted. So absolutely free was he from blame in the affair that Sir Melfield received him regularly, and they consoled with each other over their common misfortune. Violet's sister

Isabel, who previous to Violet's disaster had married Bertha's eldest brother Robert, also received the Irwells and visited at their house; but Robert's wife was too much like her sister in face and figure for him to take pleasure in William's company, which reminded him of things he wished to forget.

Bertha loved William Henry Irwell. She had been conscious of his attraction years ago when he was still happily married to Violet, whom at that time she hated intensely. She was, however, too conventional and too little given to analyzing her own feelings to recognize her love. But now that William was a free man Bertha admitted that she loved him. The Irwells and the Wests had happened to spend three weeks of the just past summer in the same Scarborough hotel, and Bertha's fancy had ripened into certainty under the sunshine of daily intimacy. As she sat sewing and thinking of him her face grew flushed and her hands trembled. His previous matrimonial disaster only added to his attraction in her eyes—there was something rich and exotic and unprosaic about it. Then, too, William was rich, a Hudleian with all the comfortable Hudley customs, yet understanding the arts of late dinner, dress, dancing, and bridge; he was full of energy and push and a certain grim humour, yet his tenderness to the lame Ernest was proverbial. Bertha knew enough of him to feel that he would be her master, yet would deny her nothing if she chose to coax him. The aimless, petted, delicate Bertha felt that he was precisely the husband she required. Mentally she selected the house they would live in when they were married, and furnished it becomingly with all the very latest improvements and fads. She even endowed herself with one or two children—she was not really fond of children, but they were the proper things to have; other people's children bored her, but she knew that she could love her own with a fierce, protective, domineering passion.

She wondered how far along the path she wished him

to tread she could persuade William Irwell to go to-night.

"I'm sure he loves me," murmured Bertha, raising her large dark eyes in an ecstasy of hope. "I'm sure he loves me."

She rocked herself gently backwards and forwards in her chair, and put fine delicate silken stitches voluptuously into the soft shimmering stuff.

"Bertha!" called her mother's voice from below. "Bertha! Bonnie's come."

Bertha's heart sank, and her face assumed a peevish and resentful expression. "Surely not to-day!" she said angrily as she put down her work and went downstairs. "Not *to-day*."

Bonnie was the four-year-old daughter of Bertha's second brother, Arthur. Arthur had married "beneath" him, to the great disgust of his family, and though they had attended his wedding and done all the proper conventional things to welcome his bride, they had not really taken her to their bosom until the advent of Bonnie. Bonnie's real name was "Edith Marjorie West"; her father gave her "Bonnie" as a pet name, and it clung to her by reason of its suitability, for she was without exception the bonniest, merriest, friendliest and most attractive child in all Hudley. A round, plump, sturdy little person, with short brown hair and dark blue eyes thick-fringed with brown lashes, her charm lay in her personality rather than in her appearance, though that was sweet enough. She had a temper of her own, and would sometimes stamp one small foot and grind her teeth in an alarming manner; but she was on the whole so friendly, so affectionate, so devoid of shyness and egoism, and had such a keen little brain and such an extraordinary capacity for make-believe, that Mr. West, who was prepared to be rather a stern grandfather to Arthur's child, was completely captivated, and loved Bonnie just this side idolatry. Bonnie loved to sit on his knee, her hands loosely clasped, and survey with round childish eyes the extraordinary phenomenon of

smoke issuing from his large oval cigar, while Mr. West cuddled the little warm eager body to him with one arm, and forgave Bonnie's mother all her sins.

Bonnie's arrival at Beech Lea meant that her mother's second child was about to be brought into the world; it had been arranged for some days that her father should bring her round when that great event approached, and leave her to stay for a week or so till things settled down again at home.

Bertha turned the angle of the stairs. Yes, there in the hall was Bonnie's cot, and a suitcase holding Bonnie's clothes, and Bonnie herself standing impatiently on one white-shoed foot, while her adoring grandmother, pincenez on nose, wrestled unavailingly with the buttons of Bonnie's neat little coat.

"Hullo, Auntie Berfa!" observed Bonnie.

(This was a stratagem on her part; she could say "Bertha" perfectly well when she chose, but with her usual acuteness she perceived that Bertha was in a bad temper, and assumed a baby-like, coaxing air to meet this situation.)

"Hullo, darling!" replied Bertha, simulating the devoted aunt. She descended the stairs slowly, fury in her heart.

"Come and undo these buttons, love," said Mrs. West, rising painfully from her knees. "I don't seem able to manage them somehow. There's one under the collar—that's it. Grannie couldn't undo your buttons, could she, darling? Stupid grannie!"

"Auntie Berfa can," remarked Bonnie, with intent to flatter. She put her arms round the kneeling Bertha's neck and kissed her. Bertha sighed and temporarily melted; it was impossible to remain annoyed under the touch of those soft little arms.

"Did Arthur bring her?" she inquired of the placid, stout, and grey-haired Mrs. West, who had seated herself upon one of the imitation Jacobean chairs and was beaming at Bonnie.

"Yes, but he couldn't stay," replied Mrs. West. "There's some trouble at the works. Poor boy! He looked worried."

"Daddy's coming to see me to-morrow," put in Bonnie.

"Yes, love," said Mrs. West soothingly. "Of course he is. You go upstairs now, dear, with Auntie Bertha. Is there a fire in the nursery, Bertha? Just look after her till tea-time, love. I think I'll just go round and see how her mother is."

Bertha's fury returned. With Bonnie on the scene there was no possibility of continuing her sewing. She gave her hand to her small niece, and conducted her upstairs to the nursery. It was now quite dark. Bertha switched on lights and broke up the fire.

"What can we play at?" inquired Bonnie, dancing about the hearthrug.

Bertha crossed the room, and, opening the door of a large cupboard, took out a few toys, which were produced when any of the West grandchildren came to the house.

"Here you are," she said, with an assumption of geniality. "You can play nicely with these."

She sat down and took up her sewing, but felt obliged to keep an eye on Bonnie's movements, and could not concentrate on her work. Bonnie was evidently pretending to be a hostess; she conducted a great deal of conversation with herself in a corner of the room, and presently minced up to her aunt, bearing a much battered tin cup and saucer.

"Will you have a cup of tea, Mrs.—um—er—Mrs.—I've forgotten what your name is," she declared in society tones. "What is your name, Auntie Bertha?" Bertha suggested "Miss West." "No, I don't mean your real name; I mean your pretend name," said Bonnie scornfully in her natural tones. "You must have a pretend name; you're a lady come to see me." Mincingly she continued: "Have you brought your little girl with you?" In a squeaky tone: "Yes, I have; here she is." "What a *sweet* little girl!" She presented Bertha with a small

but filthy doll which she carried in her left hand. "What name will you have, Auntie Bertha?"

"I'll be Mrs. West," suggested Bertha, somewhat amused by Bonnie's histrionic powers.

"Oh, you can't have that name," said Bonnie firmly. "Mother's Mrs. West."

"She's nothing of the kind," said Bertha sharply, obscurely annoyed by this remark. "*My* mother is Mrs. West; your mother is Mrs. Arthur West."

"Well, it's the same thing," observed Bonnie philosophically. "I'll call you Mrs. Bertha if you like. Will you have a cup of tea, Mrs. Bertha?"

"Thank you," said Bertha, somewhat mollified. She accepted the empty cup, and pretended to drink lavishly out of it. "What delicious tea! Thank you so much." She handed back the cup.

"You *do* drink fast," said Bonnie reprovingly. "Mother doesn't let me drink fast like that. You should take it in little sips, like this." She lifted the cup, and, crooking her little finger with much enjoyment, genteelly sipped the imaginary tea. "Will you have another cup, Mrs. Bertha?"

"Very well," agreed Bertha unwillingly. She sighed and took a fresh length of pale sewing-silk. The "tea" came before she had threaded her needle. She drank it hastily. "There now, that's enough," she said. "I don't want any more. Go and play. Auntie Bertha wants to sew."

Bonnie stood silent, fidgeting with the wickerwork of Bertha's chair.

"Aren't you going to play with me, Auntie Bertha?" she said mournfully.

"I want to sew, dear," parried Bertha.

Bonnie was silent.

"Do you think daddy will take me home to-morrow?" she inquired presently in a rather tearful voice.

"No, dear, I don't think he will," said Bertha truthfully.

"I should like to go home now," announced Bonnie, with a small sob.

Bertha was horrified. She remembered her sister-in-law's remark, a few days ago, when Bonnie's visit to Beech Lea was being arranged: "I hope she won't be homesick, and cry," and her own contemptuous, "Cry? Why should she cry? We can amuse her, I suppose?" She cast down her sewing, took the weeping Bonnie on to her knee, and kissed her and petted her and played with her till she was all smiles again. Then she put her on her feet, and observed brightly:

"Look! Your dolly's been crying for you. You go and play with her."

Bonnie obeyed. In ten minutes she was back again at Bertha's side, asking:

"Aren't you going to play with me, Auntie Bertha?"

"I *must* sew," said Bertha, unsuccessfully striving to repress her annoyance.

"I'll sew too," suggested Bonnie. "I have a thimble at home, but daddy took it away for fear I should swallow it. Let me sew too."

"You can't sew," said her aunt.

"I can!" protested the outraged Bonnie. Her voice became tearful again. "I can sew beautifully, Auntie Bertha. Mother says so."

"She's not much of a judge," murmured Bertha, with a spiteful laugh.

"What's much of a judge?" asked Bonnie with interest. Then, as Bertha remained silent, ashamed to reply, the child repeated, with a succession of small sobs: "I want to go home."

This scene was repeated until the exasperated Bertha nearly cried from sheer rage. It was too bad, it really was too bad, that Bonnie should turn up just on the very day when William Irwell was expected. She wanted to wear to-night this soft sheeny stuff which now stuck to her hot, angry hands. She *would* wear it; she *would* finish it, she thought, glaring angrily at Bonnie. What

had she to do with children—yet? It was still her mating-time, her courtship, the best time of a woman's life. If her courtship came later than her sister-in-law's, was that her fault? The colour mounted to her cheeks at this infuriating thought; Marjorie was a year younger than Bertha, and there she was, married and with two children, while Bertha—Bertha was still an unsettled spinster. Bertha had no great love for her "clever" sister-in-law; she was poor, she had extraordinary ideas, and, worst of all, her uncle kept a grubby little grocer's shop. What Arthur had been thinking of to marry her his sister could not imagine. She felt positively to hate him for this idiocy of his.

"Do play nicely with your toys, Bonnie darling," she said acidly.

Bonnie screwed up her face and cried loudly.

It was now after five o'clock; Mrs. West had returned from her son's house, and could be heard slowly and asthmatically ascending the stairs. Bonnie wrestled with the door-handle, and, running out on to the landing, clutched her grandmother's skirts and announced between sobs that she wanted to sew and that Auntie Bertha wouldn't let her. Mrs. West, with a rather stern look at her daughter, settled Bonnie in a chair at the table and fetched her own work-basket, and equipped the child with needle and red cotton and a scrap of blue sateen from her own store. Bonnie's flushed cheeks gradually resumed their normal hue; the tears receded from her eyes, and she began with zest to pretend to be a fashionable dress-maker. Mrs. West retired to her room to take off her outdoor clothes, but Bonnie remained placidly seated at the table, putting huge oblique red stitches in a lengthy hem.

Bertha's sewing neared completion; a hook and eye or so and it would be done. She held it up and admired its soft, rich folds. Now that she was happy again, she bitterly regretted her tactless treatment of Bonnie; the sulky lines were smoothed from her face, and she once

again felt capable of the rôle of loving aunt. Bonnie's bright eyes shone with admiration of Bertha's handiwork; she put out one finger and touched the lace and ribbon softly, and drew in her breath sharply to indicate her appreciation of its loveliness. Bertha kissed her impulsively and put her cheek against Bonnie's and inspected the red stitches; peace was restored, and Bertha fervently hoped that her harshness was forgotten and forgiven.

Mr. West came in unexpectedly early, and the family went down into the long brown dining-room to partake of high tea. Mr. West was delighted at Bonnie's arrival; his usually grave, dark features relaxed, and he began to tease his granddaughter, who sustained her end of the conversation with much sprightliness.

"Are we going to have the fire lighted in the drawing-room this evening?" asked Bertha of her mother.

"A fire in the drawing-room?" repeated Mrs. West in a perplexed voice. "No. Why should we?"

"Isn't William Irwell coming?" said Bertha aggressively, annoyed at being even to so small a degree obliged to reveal her interest in the event.

"Only to see your father on chapel business, love," said Mrs. West, reassured.

"But he's sure to come in and talk to us afterwards," persisted Bertha, her fear that he might not do so sharpening her voice.

"Oh yes, I dare say he will," replied her mother placidly. "But he can come into the dining-room, I suppose?"

Bertha knew that she did not look her best amid the brown shades of the dining-room, and she coloured with annoyance. She remembered also her frustrated hope of her father's late return.

"Everything goes against me," she thought bitterly. "I may only see him for a few minutes, perhaps not at all."

She tightened her pretty mouth, and her face grew sulky.

Bonnie, who was observing her, suddenly remarked in a loud childish voice :

“ I think I'd rather go and stay with Uncle Marcus.”

This remark was anathema to the West family. “ Uncle Marcus ” was the uncle (before alluded to) of Bonnie's mother Marjorie ; he kept a small grocer's shop, and was emphatically not a gentleman, though he was kindly, good natured, and respectable. In the privacy of their bedroom Mr. and Mrs. West often lamented Marcus Johnson's undeniable kinship with their grandchild, and though they were too religious and conscientious to employ open or harsh methods to alienate Bonnie from her great-uncle, they had the child at Beech Lea as often as possible, were very particular about her manners and little refinements, and hoped that she would grow out of her childish affection for him.

At Bonnie's unfortunate remark, therefore, Mr. West coloured, and Mrs. West looked grieved and upset.

“ What have you been doing to the child, Bertha ? ” asked Mr. West angrily.

“ Nothing, father,” replied Bertha in shrill defence.

“ It's something if we can't keep her happy here for one afternoon with two women in the house,” pursued Mr. West, really annoyed.

“ Really, William ! ” said Mrs. West, annoyed in her turn. “ I'm sure she's happy enough—and besides, I've been out all the afternoon at Marjorie's.”

“ Don't you know how to look after a child *yet* ? ” demanded Mr. West angrily of his daughter.

Bertha's throat swelled, and a passionate indignation against her father and her mother and Arthur and Marjorie and Bonnie and the whole world flooded her body. Couldn't they understand how important William Irwell's visit to-night was to her ? And how Bonnie's arrival had upset her plans ? Bertha was such a profound egoist that it never occurred to her that other people were not as cognizant of her plans and feelings as she was herself. Her self, her emotions, her ideas, her schemes filled the

world and impregnated the atmosphere to such an extent that it did not seem possible to her for anyone to remain ignorant of them. Her hands shook, and she could not eat; tears rose to her large, dreamy eyes. Her mother perceived them, and sighed.

"Well, never mind," she said consolingly to the world in general. "Bonnie's quite happy now, aren't you, love?"

"Yes," agreed that young lady, nodding her head emphatically and repeating the process several times for the pleasure of seeing her short hair swing perilously near her bread and jam.

"Don't do that, love; you look like a perfect mandarin," observed Mrs. West, in whose mind the laws of association seemed to work in a peculiar but forceful manner.

"What's a mandarin?" asked Bonnie with interest.

Mrs. West entangled herself in explanations; her husband came to her rescue with masculine superiority; the meal passed.

Bertha's spirit was soothed by Mrs. West's announcement that Bonnie's bedtime came at seven o'clock. Cheered by the prospect of an early release, she obediently played the wildest games which Bonnie's fertile imagination could invent, and made herself thoroughly dirty and untidy, secure in the knowledge that she would have half an hour at least in which to make herself charming before the appearance of William Irwell. Bonnie, of course, declined to go to bed at seven; and Mrs. West, who came into the nursery just as the clock struck the hour, gave the child fifteen minutes' grace while she herself made preparations and warmed the little cot and nightgown. Presently she reappeared.

"Now, Bertha!" she said. "I've turned on the bath water and warmed a clean towel. Be careful not to let the child get cold—it's a very raw evening. Be sure you remember to brush her teeth."

"Have I got to bath her?" said Bertha in vexed surprise.

"Well, of course. Who else?" remarked Mrs. West, collecting toys and straightening the furniture.

"There's Annie," suggested Bertha sulkily. (Annie was the Beech Lea cook; she had been with the family more than thirty years, and was much trusted.)

"It's her night out, as you know perfectly well," replied Mrs. West, reddening a little between her exertions and her annoyance with her daughter. "And the other two are much too young and flighty. Besides, the child has never been bathed by a servant in her life, and she isn't going to begin it here. If you won't do it I'll bath her myself."

"Nonsense! Of course you know you can't bath her, with your asthma; you know you can't," said the infuriated Bertha with trembling lips. "I'll put her to bed, of course; I only wanted to know what you'd arranged. Come, Bonnie."

She held out her hand to her niece, who accepted it with reluctance and retired with her to the bathroom. Bonnie tried her most charming wiles on the obdurate Bertha, and played amusing tricks with each small garment as it was removed. Bertha, with tears in her eyes and lips tightly compressed, knelt before the child and struggled with buttons and unexpected tapes and tried to be as quick as possible. She picked up the warm naked little body and lifted it into the bath, and repenting somewhat of her ill-humour patted the round arms.

"Oo, Auntie Bertha!" cried the squirming Bonnie. "Your hands *are* cold. Mother always warms hers."

Bertha's ill-humour returned, increased tenfold. She sternly forbade the formation of waves in the bath, and put the nail-brush, a fascinating article because floatable, out of Bonnie's reach. In her haste she would have omitted the tooth-brushing ceremony, but Bonnie's eyes looked so shocked at the mere suggestion that she was obliged to perform it.

At length the child was safely buttoned into her woollen nightgown and carried into her cot. Bertha put out the

lights and returned to the bathroom to collect Bonnie's socks and shoes, which she had accidentally left there. On the way she heard voices in the hall, and leaning cautiously over the banisters saw her brother Arthur talking to Mrs. West. Arthur was dark and good looking, but to-night he looked tired and dirty, and his hair was not well groomed. Bertha did not reflect that he was worried about a very dearly loved wife, and she had forgotten that there was trouble at the works (her brother was an engineer with a large Hudley firm). She merely thought pettishly: "I do wish Arthur would be more careful about his collars: he isn't half as particular about his appearance now as he was before he married"; and said aloud: "Hullo, Arthur!" in a tone of disagreeable surprise.

"Well, Arthur," observed Mrs. West in a motherly tone, "if you can't trust your child to your own mother for an afternoon, really! He's come round to see Bonnie," she added explanatorily over her shoulder to Bertha.

"Marjorie was worried about her," said Arthur gloomily.

The touching picture of Marjorie lying in bed suffering and worrying about her little Bonnie pierced Bertha's selfishness and went to her heart, for like most egoists she was intensely sentimental.

"Bonnie's perfectly happy, Arthur," she said in a tone of warm affection. "And she's been as good as gold. I've just put her to bed. Come upstairs and see her. You can tell Marjorie from me that she's perfectly happy."

Arthur gave a somewhat incredulous grunt, mounted the stairs and went in to see his little daughter, who greeted him with transports of delight. Bertha found the socks on the bathroom floor, and was just recrossing the landing when she heard the following conversation:

"Well, will you take me home the day *after* tomorrow?"

"I can't promise, sweetheart," said Arthur. "You

know you said you'd be a good girl and stay here for a week. You're quite all right here, you know."

Bonnie paused to consider this, and then announced distinctly :

"I don't like Auntie Bertha."

Bertha's cheeks flamed. All her exasperation at Bonnie's untimely arrival returned. She glanced at her watch ; it was nearly eight o'clock. Impossible to begin dressing till Arthur had gone. How much longer did he intend to stay? Would he tell Mrs. West what Bonnie had said? She yearned for him to be out of the house, and with that idea in her mind went into the bedroom and announced that it was really time for Bonnie to go to sleep now. Arthur made no reply to this ; he kissed Bonnie, however, and bade her good-night, then followed Bertha downstairs and put on his hat and coat. Mrs. West came out into the hall.

"Are you going, Arthur?" she said, apparently much disappointed.

("If he stays!" thought Bertha.)

"Yes, I want to get back," said Arthur, slowly buttoning his coat. "But I don't think I need have brought Bonnie quite so soon," he added.

"Oh, it was the best thing to bring her when you did," said Mrs. West consolingly.

"When is Gladys coming home?" asked Arthur.

To Bertha this casual question was a most biting commentary on her own ability to look after Bonnie. Her sister Gladys was a favourite with all children ; though rather stupid she was kind and untiringly patient.

"She's coming to-morrow," Bertha said sharply. "Good-night, Arthur." She kissed him peevishly. "I'll just go and tidy myself."

She ran upstairs and flung herself into her bedroom, shutting the door with an angry snap which awoke Bonnie across the landing.

"Anyone coming?" inquired Arthur, with a glance in the direction of Bertha's flight.

“No,” said Mrs. West. “Oh—at least—William Irwell’s coming in to see your father.”

“So long as it’s a man!” grumbled Arthur cryptically.

His mother, however, understood him perfectly, for she coloured a little and said in a tone of exasperation :

“Really, Arthur! I’m sure Bertha doesn’t care twopence about William Irwell. Why, she hardly knows him.”

Arthur gave a cynical snort, kissed his mother, and departed.

Meanwhile Bertha had removed her afternoon frock and was standing before the mirror carefully brushing her almost black hair, which though not thick was long and wavy. Her admiration for it almost restored her to good temper. She dressed it with great care, and scented it, and had just begun operations with her powder-puff upon her already pale face and neck when she heard the front door bell ring. She started, scattering powder over the gleaming silver of her dressing-table; and began hurriedly to open drawers and wardrobes until she had collected the set of garments she meant to wear—it had been difficult for her to decide upon them, for she wanted William Irwell to know that she had made herself look nice for him, and she wanted to keep Mr. and Mrs. West in ignorance of that fact. To her intense annoyance the delicate stuff she had worked upon all the afternoon was not wearable. A hook was too tight.

“If Bonnie hadn’t come it would have been all right,” thought Bertha bitterly.

She wondered whether she had time to find her needle and alter the offending hook. A glance at her watch terrified her; if she were not quick William Irwell might be gone before she saw him at all. She made nervous haste; things went wrong, and mentally she attributed each tiresome little happening to Bonnie and Bonnie’s mother.

2.

At last she was ready, and ran noiselessly downstairs. Voices warned her that Mr. and Mrs. West and their guest were in the dining-room; she turned the handle of the door and entered. She was only just in time; William Irwell's business—which was merely the signing of a paper, and had been done at Beech Lea instead of at a lawyer's office as a compliment to Mr. West's age and municipal preoccupations—had long been completed, and as Bertha did not appear William was gradually steering the conversation round to a suitable point for his departure. On Bertha's entrance, however, he made up his mind to stay for the rest of the evening. He rose and shook hands.

"Good-evening, William," said Bertha, colouring pleasantly.

She sat down, skilfully displaying a certain amount—not too much—of silk-clad ankle. Mr. West surveyed her elaborate hair and dainty frock with cold suspicion, but she looked so bright and happy that he thawed somewhat.

William Irwell was rarely given any of the short names which fall to the lot of Williams. His first wife had called him "Bill" in moments of expansion, but she was truly one of those exceptions which prove the rule. No sensible person would address William Irwell as anything but "William." In person he was short and stocky, as so many Yorkshiremen are; strong and wiry, full of vitality, rather restless, pursuing business and pleasure with equal zest and shrewdness. His hair was dark brown and well brushed, his complexion rather swarthy, his brown eyes keen and roving. He was well groomed and well dressed, and he exuded an atmosphere of wealth, assurance, and a certain good-natured contempt for the previous generation and their curious little whims.

Mr. West did not like William Irwell. Their politics were not harmonious, Mr. West being mildly Liberal, and Irwell scornfully Conservative—the more scornful

because his own father had been a determined Liberal. William Irwell sent geese and turkeys to his foremen at Christmas, and was a good master to his men in his own way, but he treated them in a forceful, Kiplingish kind of manner which Mr. West detested. Socialistic persons such as Arthur laughed at Mr. West's mild panaceas for social evils, but he himself believed in them with all the force of his strong and severe character, and an encounter with William Irwell always enabled him to understand, for a few moments, Arthur's point of view. Mr. West was a deeply religious man; William Irwell, though orthodox enough and bitterly condemnatory of agnostics and atheists, rarely entered the family pew at chapel. Mr. West was strictly moral; he abhorred gambling and betting, disliked the theatre, never entered a music-hall, and deprecated the practice of dancing. His utmost concession to the spirit of the age was an occasional quiet hand of cards with his family. William Irwell was moral in theory, but had occasional lapses (carefully concealed) in practice, and Mr. West's other prejudices seemed to him antediluvian and ridiculous.

"Suppose we have a little bridge?" suggested Mrs. West tentatively. "There are just four of us."

Mr. West gravely approved. The green card-table was moved in from the drawing-room by William and Bertha, and the four sat down to play. Mrs. West flutteringly declared that she dared not play with William, but he gallantly overruled her fears. The evening proceeded. Mr. West played cards in a severe, cold, straightforwardly efficient manner; Mrs. West forgot everything she ought to have remembered in a placidly cheerful way. Bertha was just the kind of player William Irwell admired. She adored bridge; she rarely forgot anything, she played with skill and precision; yet she deferred to his masculine superiority of play and listened willingly to his explanations at the end of each game. Sitting back in his chair, waiting patiently for Mrs. West to remember to lead, from behind his fan of cards William appreciated Bertha's

scented hair and pale face and the filmy expensiveness of her frock. He had, in fact, vaguely determined some months ago that he would marry Bertha West, and he now decided that it was time he got on with the business. He knew her peevishness and selfishness well enough, but he did not think she would treat him to any of that kind of nonsense when she was married and had a house and children of her own to look after. (In this he judged correctly; idleness and lack of anything to think about except herself, cemented by delicate health, formed the foundations of the imposing structure of Bertha's egoism.) In fact, William understood Bertha perfectly, though without ever consciously analyzing her to himself, and he loved her—not indeed with the tiresome passion he had felt for his foolish first wife, but still well and certainly enough. He had been dilatory in his advances because he thought delay was seemly in his position; now he intended to proceed.

Bertha, with her nerves a-quiver, felt his admiring eyes upon her and exulted. A faint colour rose into her cheeks.

"How can I help things on a little?" she wondered. "I must ask him to come again." "That isn't a trump, mother," she said aloud with unwonted gentleness. Inspiration came, and she inwardly decided: "When he goes I'll say to him, 'We hadn't seen you for such an age, William; you must come in again some time.' Or, 'You must *drop* in again some time.' Yes, that sounds more casual. 'We hadn't seen you for such an age. . . .'"

The conversation ran chiefly upon the vicissitudes of the game and the affairs of Hudley notabilities. Bertha loved to gossip, and did it well, amassing and distributing detail in large quantities without appearing too eager for scandal. Supper came, brought in by the experienced parlourmaid who was considered too flighty to bath Bonnie. Bertha cut a slice of cake for William, and wished earnestly that he and she were in their own house, married, and entertaining Mr. and Mrs. West for the evening. William had precisely the same thought.

Presently William stood up to go. He shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. West and uttered a few words of banal thanks, then turned towards Bertha. Bertha gave him her hand, and opened her mouth to begin her carefully prepared speech.

"We hadn't seen you for such an *age*, William," she began.

An expression of intense anxiety had appeared on Mrs. West's face.

"What's the matter, Mary?" asked her husband testily.

"I'm sure I heard Bonnie cry," said Mrs. West anxiously. "Bertha, love, just run up and see. There! It is her crying. Just run up, Bertha."

Bertha turned abruptly on her heel and flew like an arrow straight from the room up the stairs to the side of Bonnie's cot. In instant flight lay the only possibility of decent behaviour; had she remained in the room one second longer, her raging disappointment must have betrayed itself in some flagrant outburst. Bonnie, only half awake, was sobbing in a subdued and moaning manner. On Bertha's entrance she adopted a more animated tone, and alleged as an excuse for her tears that there were cats on the wall which seemed to move with the sudden flickers of the dying fire.

"No, love; no, darling; those aren't cats," said Bertha in sugared tones, shaking with fury. She switched on a light. "See! They're part of the pattern on the wall-paper. They're pretty flowers."

Bonnie, always a reasonable child, inspected the pseudo-cats through her tears and appeared half convinced.

"Lift me up and let me look at them," she commanded.

Bertha flung back the blankets of the cot with an ungentle hand, but she dared not be ungentle to Bonnie; she picked up the child carefully, kissed and petted her, and lifted her into a position whence she could see and touch one of the large green-and-mauve patches on the paper.

"Well, they looked exactly like cats," said Bonnie, admitting defeat.

Bertha replaced the child in her cot, tucked her up, and kissed her. Her desire to be downstairs with William Irwell was almost insane in its strength, but nevertheless, as she passed the dulling fire, some interior power compelled her against her will to stoop and break up the coal until the flames danced once more. In this position she heard the front door close and knew that William had left the house. She went downstairs and found that it was so; Mr. West was standing with his back to the dining-room fire, in the comfortable attitude of one whose guests have gone; the parlourmaid was removing the supper; and Mrs. West was opening a window to let out the smoke. Bertha moved aimlessly about the room and finally paused by the fire, feeling suddenly cold and shivering. Mrs. West made inquiries about Bonnie.

"Why, Bertha, you do look white!" she observed. "Are you cold? You'd better get off to bed. I do hope," she continued anxiously, "that you aren't going to have a cold. Better take your temperature. The thermometer's in my corner cupboard."

Bertha was much given to colds, influenza, bronchitis, loss of appetite, and a general disposition to despise prevention and to be very sorry for herself when cures became necessary.

"I haven't caught cold," she said peevishly. "But I may as well go to bed. William's gone, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, long since," replied her mother, who knew nothing of Bertha's passion for William Irwell. Considering how carefully Bertha concealed her love from her mother, Mrs. West's ignorance was not surprising; but nevertheless the girl resented this ignorance and despised her mother for her lack of perception. She bade her parents good-night and went to her room, contemptuously ignoring the suggestion of the thermometer.

Another girl, racked by thwarted desire as Bertha then was, might have jerked her vainly pretty frock angrily

from her person and cast it in a heap on the floor; but Bertha loosed each press-stud and hook carefully, slid out of her frock with gentle, restrained movements, hung it upon a "hanger" and covered it with swathings of tissue paper before finally placing it in her large but overflowingly full wardrobe. Not that this care pleased or soothed her; on the contrary, each restrained action seemed further to exacerbate her irritated nerves, but such care was to her necessary, proper, and not to be omitted from any stress of emotion.

Bertha was in bed before her father and mother came upstairs, and she remained quiet and calm in expectation of a visit from her mother. This, however, did not occur; presently there was the closing of a door and the click of an electric light switch, the murmur of conversation died and the house slept. Then Bertha gave vent to her disappointment, sobbing and crying and tossing upon her pillow in uncontrolled misery.

"It may be months before I see him again!" she cried to the night. "Months! And I can't bear to wait all that time."

In such moments as these self-knowledge would burst upon Bertha, all the more agonizing because it came so rarely. She was appalled by her own selfishness, and could not understand how she could do and say such horrible things. It was not *her* fault that she was selfish, she thought, melting with compassion for her own hard lot; she did not get a fair chance; she lived with people whom she did not love. How could one love the mad-dingly stupid Gladys? Parents, of course, were in her view always impossible. She had no motive-power sufficiently strong to make her resolve to do differently. If she were married to William Irwell, now! At this thought her sobs broke out again, and she began again to commiserate herself. Still some slight feeling of shame for her own shortcomings persisted, and she decided that to-morrow she would be different; she would be bright and unselfish, and display affection towards the returning

Gladys. Perhaps God would reward her for her goodness by bringing William Irwell to her side again soon. The thought of God was not, however, a comfortable one to Bertha; she felt that in the days of her heedless youth she had neglected Him profoundly—one could hardly expect Him to give her William Irwell in return for a few hours' repentance. This high rating of William Irwell was at least not egoistical, and the tears which came into Bertha's eyes at the thought of him were of a less bitter and more healing kind than those produced by her own family miseries. Decidedly to-morrow should find her good.

From far away in the dark quiet house came the faint tinkle of the telephone.

Bertha sat up in bed promptly.

"It will be Arthur telephoning about Marjorie," she thought, interested for once—as a result of her recent repentance—in somebody else's affairs. "I hope it's a boy. . . . I must go down and answer the 'phone."

She jerked her bed-coverings aside and remembered suddenly her own appearance. Her face was red and bleared, her eyes swollen. If she went down and took Arthur's message and came up and gave it to her mother, Mrs. West would see that she had been crying, and would ask questions. Bertha shrank from the thought of having to make revealing answers—her miseries and loves were her own, and to be shared with no man. She paused, motionless, and considered the question. Should she go down? It was her duty to go. It was impossible that the asthmatic Mrs. West should go.

"Father ought to go," thought Bertha in a burst of virtuous indignation. She knew, however, perfectly well that her father was sufficiently like herself to hesitate about going.

Still, she ought to go. The bell rang again. Bertha jumped out of bed, made a light, and seized her dressing-gown. At that precise moment Mrs. West's door opened, and shuffling footsteps went heavily along the landing and

down the stairs. Bertha dropped her dressing-gown, and her face took on an aggrieved expression. Of course! She was just about to do a virtuous action when someone else forestalled her and took all the credit. Privately she was ashamed that her elderly mother should have to rise from her bed in the middle of the night to answer the telephone, and she advanced an illogical grievance to defend herself from her shame.

"It's too bad! They never give me a chance! They always blame me for things, when they haven't given me a chance to do them!" she muttered fretfully to herself. Some impulse made her climb back into bed, turn out the light, and burrow deep into the bedclothes. Faint echoes of her mother's share of the telephone conversation floated up from the library. Bertha hardly knew whether she was sufficiently interested to listen or not.

Presently the voice ceased, and footsteps came towards Bertha's room. The door was flung open, and lights blazed. Bertha sat up with an exaggerated blinking. In the doorway stood Mrs. West in a warm red dressing-gown, her thick grey hair hanging in short frizzy ropes on each side of her face.

"Didn't you hear the 'phone?" she demanded, rather hot and cross.

"Yes," said Bertha, somehow unable to utter the convenient lie.

"Then I think you might have gone down to answer it, Bertha, I do indeed," said Mrs. West hotly. She was, however, incapable of sustained anger, and her next sentences had a forgiving tone. "However, that's neither here nor there. It was Arthur. Marjorie's baby's come."

Mr. West was heard on the landing demanding the sex of the baby.

"It's a boy," announced Mrs. West proudly. She looked at Bertha, unconsciously expecting some congratulatory sentence. As none came, she put out the light and left the room abruptly.

Bertha lay down, and a wave of bitterness surged over

her. That the detested Marjorie, a girl of neither birth nor wealth, a year younger than Bertha—there lay the worst sting—and certainly not pretty, should produce a male child before the fascinating Bertha, endowed as she was with every advantage of wealth and beauty—Bertha's catalogue of advantages did not include education—had even succeeded in getting married, was not to be borne.

Like many people who pride themselves on being extremely up-to-date and quite out of touch with the previous generation, Bertha was governed by the instincts of an uncultivated savage. The social forms in which she expressed herself were certainly of the twentieth century, but her motives and feelings were precisely those which were current in the dawn of civilization. If she had gone to the telephone and received the message herself, the news would have become part of her personality, and she would have gloated over it; communicated to her by another she resented it, and fed her resentment by an appeal to her primitive passions.

3.

The duty of the next afternoon was apparently to go to town with Mrs. West and Bonnie, and thence proceed to the station to meet the returning Gladys. In the morning Mrs. West and Bertha called to inquire about Marjorie: this made Bertha sullen, and she was sullen still as the trio, each representing a different generation, walked slowly down Prince's Road into Hudley. It was cold. Bertha was muffled up and knew that she was not looking her best. Bonnie, on the other hand, was full of glee, and proud of herself on the score of a victory which she had obtained over the combined forces of her grandmother and aunt. She had desired to carry out with her a rather disreputable doll, and no consideration of convention would induce her to abandon this idea. With flushed cheeks and brimming eyes she announced:

"But I *always* take her out with me," with that

pathetic faith in the continuance of things as they always have been so characteristic of children.

"She's very like her mother," said Mrs. West, pretending to be vexed, though her heart was really full of tenderness for the eager little child.

"Arthur is very obstinate at times, too," said Bertha, also rather touched and therefore defending Marjorie from the imputation of obstinacy.

Now that they had reached Hudley's main street, however, and were constantly encountering Bertha's acquaintances, she did not feel quite so affectionate towards the dirty doll, which lay in the crook of Bonnie's motherly left arm. Had it been clean and lacy, or had the ancestry of Bonnie's mother been satisfactory, the doll would have been quite acceptable. As it was, Bertha's sullenness deepened into irritation.

"Let's have some tea before we go to the station," she suggested as they threaded their way along the crowded street.

"There's hardly time, love, I think," observed Mrs. West. Seeing her daughter's face assume a look of gloom at this, she reversed her previous decision—a frequent occurrence with her—and said: "Very well. I dare say we can manage it. We can turn down here."

The three turned down past the solid, curving brass name-plate of that celebrated firm of Hudley lawyers wherein Ernest Irwell was a partner, and almost ran into William Irwell, who was just leaving the building. He raised his hat and paused, obviously intending conversation. Bertha blushed and smiled, and her face fell into prettiness at once.

William Henry Irwell was almost as great a sentimentalist as Bertha. Keen and hard beyond the verge of selfishness, he was capable of abandoning carefully laid plans and even of losing money for a sudden sentimental whim, and strong minded enough not to regret having done so. The sudden flight of Bertha—whose motives, of course, he did not know—towards a sobbing Bonnie on the

previous evening had gone straight to his heart ; it touched the "home and wife and children" chord, and brought the blood to his head and the tears almost into his eyes. Walking from the house through the misty October dark, he felt stirred by a lasting emotion, and took a private oath to marry Bertha West as quickly as possible—he was tired of being unmarried. Hudley should no longer remember his wife's desertion and pity his loneliness.

His first words were addressed to Bonnie, who, nothing loath, responded vivaciously, and made eyes at William—an accomplishment she certainly had not learned from her mother, who was ignorant of its first principles. Bertha at once felt that Bonnie was the sweetest child in the world, and behaved accordingly. Some pretty baby-talk and petting passed. Then William said :

"Are you going to that dance in the last week of November? It's for waifs and strays, or orphans, or some good work or other. I'm to be an M.C. I'm sure I don't know why."

The reason for this office was that his subscription in response to a recent appeal had headed the list. Mr. West gave moderate amounts systematically; William Irwell made huge spasmodic gifts when a pathetic pamphlet pierced his heart.

"I should like to go, very much," said Bertha eagerly. "Have you any tickets to sell?"

William had at least fifty pink cardboard oblongs in the pocket of his overcoat, and in any case his brother Ernest, on whose threshold they were standing, was acting as secretary to the affair, and would presumably be able to supply any amount of tickets. Mindful of his matrimonial designs, however, he said :

"I'll bring them round some evening. You'll want two, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, we'd better have two," said Mrs. West placidly. "Gladys will go, I dare say. How much are they?" She drew forward her silver bag.

"I don't quite remember," lied William, whose custom

it decidedly was not to forget details of figures. To bring already paid-for tickets meant merely ringing at the Beech Lea bell and handing in an envelope, whereas he desired the tickets to procure him an interview with Bertha. "I'll bring them in some evening next week—not Monday. Nor Wednesday, because I have a committee meeting about the dance. We can settle up the money when I bring them."

Farewells followed; William looked at Bertha in a rather marked manner, and left them. Bertha understood quite well that William Irwell had made up his mind to pay her attentions, and that he intended to begin this interesting process next Tuesday evening. Her heart beat fast, she felt extraordinarily happy, and, throwing back her furs, exclaimed that she was sure it had become warmer.

A slight argument followed about the time of arrival of Gladys's train; Bertha, who was right, was most unusually graceful to her mother, who was wrong. Finding that they had ample time for a cup of tea, they repaired to a café. Bonnie, who had a tremendous love of detail, insisted on feeding her doll in a realistic manner. Bertha kept up the make-believe charmingly, laughed and talked, and made Bonnie thoroughly happy. They prepared to leave. A few small, rather attractively shaped biscuits remained on the plate in the centre of the table.

"I want to take these home for Cuddly"—"Cuddly" was the doll's name, which Bertha now thought charming—"because she likes them so," observed Bonnie, stretching out a tentative hand.

"We've plenty of biscuits at home for Cuddly, love," said Mrs. West, rather shocked.

"I want these," announced Bonnie firmly.

"Let her have them, mother," pleaded Bertha. "See! They'll go into this old envelope of mine. Shall Auntie Bertha put them into her bag?"

When Mrs. West and the now ecstatic Bonnie left the shop, Bertha lingered a minute to buy a packet of the elegantly shaped biscuits.

"You see!" she mentally told the world as they hurried round the corner to the station, "I can be ever so nice and kind and good when I'm happy."

The obvious retort was, "So can everybody, even murderers," but Bertha's conscience did not supply it.

Gladys's train was late. Even the unobservant Mrs. West was surprised at Bertha's exemplary patience and cheerfulness as they paced the cold platform.

At length the train roared round the curve into the station. Bonnie spied her aunt leaning out of a carriage window, and danced ecstatically to meet her. (She was always in an ecstasy about something—that was part of her charm.) Gladys descended. She was a plain, dowdy woman, nearing the forties, with high shoulders, thick gold spectacles, and quantities of heavy dull hair which was beginning to turn grey. She was, however, renowned in the family for her unfailing sympathy, cheerfulness, and loving service. Her ideal of duty was high, and she strove earnestly, if stupidly, to attain it. Her clothes were always wrong; to-day she had a new, evidently London-bought hat, the effect of which above her heavy, good-humoured face was really appalling. Ordinarily Bertha's remarks on or glances at the hat would have been scathing, but this afternoon she observed convincingly:

"What a pretty hat, Glad! Where did you get it?"

When they were settled in a taxi—Mr. West had taken the car to Leeds—Mrs. West communicated the great news of the arrival of her grandson. Gladys beamed joy from behind her spectacles; she was fond of all her relatives, and Arthur and Marjorie were her especial favourites.

"And how's Edith's boy?" asked Mrs. West. (Edith was the cousin whom Gladys had been visiting.)

Gladys's face clouded.

"Poor little thing!" she said. "He's all skin and bone. Doesn't weigh half as much as he ought to do for his age. I'm sure Edith does everything she can think of for him, but he doesn't seem to get on."

Had Bertha not met William Irwell that afternoon, she would have felt an irrepressible secret desire to gloat over the superiority of Bonnie to her little half-cousin; as it was, in her happiness she felt touched and was sorry for her cousin Edith, and said :

“ I *am* sorry,” with sincere compassion.

She even made up her mind to write to Edith for Christmas. . . .

Yet she had heard of people who were “ Bright enough when they got their own way, but surly and irritable when it was denied them ”—and contemptuously despised such weak-kneed creatures.

CHAPTER II

INTRUSION OF THE PAST

1.

ON the following Tuesday evening William Irwell called at Beech Lea with the dance tickets, according to his arrangement. He was admitted into the drawing-room, where Mrs. West and her two daughters were reading or sewing round the fire, and made himself generally agreeable. From Bertha's point of view the evening was not a success, for the conversation went astray in the wilderness of Gladys's Sunday-school activities, and all Bertha's efforts could not recall it to the path of her own interests and perfections. In November William Irwell called twice at Beech Lea, once with a flimsy pretext and once with no pretext at all. The placid Mrs. West was disagreeably fluttered by these visits. She began to think that they must "mean something," and tried hard to extract an opinion from Bertha on the subject. Her daughter's reticence increased her suspicions. In spite of his half-million, Mrs. West did not attempt to smooth William Irwell's way to Bertha; she knew her husband's prejudice against him, and she felt that the Wests were too closely connected with the Huntleys for a match between Bertha and the husband of a divorced Huntley to be comfortable. She would not, of course, oppose such a match if she thought Bertha's happiness was involved, but she would not deliberately encourage it.

Bertha herself felt that the affair was proceeding far too slowly; she longed to jog events by their elbow and hurry them on to the desired consummation of matrimony. She pinned her hopes of speedy progress on the dance. She chose with great care and a good deal of peevish fault-

finding a very exquisite and very expensive pale softly-glancing evening frock. She took endless trouble to secure glittering shoes which matched her frock exactly, and bought a variety of hair ornaments which she held with voluptuous pleasure against her dark waving hair and peered at through her mirror, burning much electric light in order to investigate their degree of sparkle.

It was, therefore, with an almost intolerable pang that at breakfast on the very morning of the dance she heard Gladys slowly and with many reservations announce that she personally rather thought that on the whole she didn't particularly want to go to the dance that night. (Bonnie had, of course, long since gone home; the new nephew had been christened and had subsided from a prodigious marvel into a charming but ordinary infant.) Mr. and Mrs. West had long ceased to attend any dances except mayor's balls, where graciousness demanded the presence of Mr. West in his capacity as ex-mayor. Robert West and his wife, Isabel, with whom Bertha frequently attended social functions, were experiencing a prolonged lack of maids and were, therefore, not available for the evening's entertainment. The old-fashioned Mr. West had sufficiently strong objections to two sisters going alone to a dance, and he certainly would not allow Bertha to go without her sister unless she were taken by some elderly family friend.

"Why don't you want to go, Glad?" said Bertha sharply.

"I just don't feel that I want to," hesitated Gladys. Feeling that this reply was weak and unsatisfactory, she added, rather untruthfully: "I hardly think my frock's quite fit."

"You've had plenty of time to get another," commented Bertha acidly.

"You could easily pop over to Bradford this morning and get one, love," Mrs. West admonished her eldest daughter.

"Surely much of a dress isn't necessary at a charity affair," observed Mr. West coldly.

"It will be a most fashionable affair, father," Bertha contradicted him, not immediately realizing in her irritation that she was arguing against her own cause.

Mr. West remarked unamiably that he needed the car that morning, so if any Bradford-going were to be done it would have to be by train. Mrs. West's enthusiasm for Bradford immediately withered: being stout and asthmatical she liked ease. Gladys looked distressed, and blushed for her own lack of candour. Her dress was as "fit" as her dresses ever were. But she knew that her heavy good-natured face and clumsy figure looked worse than usual in evening dress, and her thick spectacles were an anguish to her. Sometimes in earlier days when she dutifully accompanied the brilliant and youthful Bertha to dances she had removed the disfiguring conveniences at Bertha's request, and then sat miserably through the evening, peering short-sightedly at people and making blunders as to their identity, conscious the while of a broad red mark across the bridge of her nose, and trying not to blink. She was stupid and rather irritatingly good, and she showed her best side when dealing with troubles which gay young dancers had never heard of. To-day she shrank from the thought of sitting out half the evening, trying not to appear noticeable, while Bertha enjoyed herself in the centre of the room. A few married men of her acquaintance who knew her worth danced regularly with Gladys, it is true, but she danced badly, and knew it, and it hurt her pride that her partners should approach her with bemoaning in their hearts.

"Why not get Arthur to go with you?" she suggested. "He and Marjorie used to be fond of dancing."

"It's not a bad idea," said Bertha thoughtfully. "I'll ring him up and see what he says."

"It's no good going now," put in Mr. West. "He'll be off to the works long ago."

It was a bitter grievance with Mr. West that Arthur preferred to make engines with strangers rather than cloth with his brother Robert, and his remark was an allusion

to the undoubted fact that Arthur was an hireling of whom early hours were expected and not a partner who could enter his office when he chose.

"Dinnertime will do," said Bertha hastily, quite understanding her father's allusion to his grievance.

After dinner, therefore—a meal which, in spite of Bertha's constant protests, the Wests still took in the middle of the day—the girl went to the telephone and rang up her brother's house and explained her wishes.

"Well—I don't think I'll come, Bertha," said Marjorie's voice at the other end—a voice which always irritated Bertha by its superior refinement and un-Hudleian accent. "You see, there's baby. Besides, it's Emmeline's night out."

"Ask Arthur if he'll come with me by himself, then," persisted Bertha with a frown.

"I'll ask him," said Marjorie dubiously. She left the instrument for a minute, and returned promptly with: "He says he'd really rather not."

"But I must have someone to go with," said Bertha, almost in tears. "I simply must. Gladys won't go. And I've got a new dress. We needn't stay all the time, tell him. Tell him I'll come home early if he likes."

"I'll see what he says," came in a low and still doubtful tone. There was a longish pause, during which Bertha sensed the argument which was proceeding at the other end of the telephone; but in her heated imagination Arthur showed a disposition to go to the dance and Marjorie argued him out of it, whereas in reality it was the other way round. "It's lonely for her without Fred," was Marjorie's clinching argument, and presently she said merrily into the receiver: "Arthur wants to know what you call early."

"Twelve—twelve," said Bertha eagerly, trembling with joy at this favourable inquiry.

Another pause, and then:

"What time do you want to go? Arthur gets home so late just now—there's trouble at the works again."

"I'll call round for him in the car at half-past seven," said Bertha still more eagerly.

"You can manage half-past seven quite well," said Marjorie to her husband, who was sitting on the bottom stair and listening to her end of the conversation.

"I shall want something to eat before I go," grumbled Arthur.

Reassured on this point, he remarked: "I don't see why you're so keen for me to waste four hours at an idiotic dance just to please Bertha, I'm sure."

"Bertha was very kind to Bonnie when she stayed at Beech Lea," said Bonnie's mother. To Arthur's non-committal grunt she said firmly: "*She was*, Arthur. She bought her those biscuits shaped like flowers. Don't you remember? Very well, Bertha," she continued more loudly down the telephone, "Arthur will try to be ready by half-past seven."

Bertha hung up the receiver and ran gaily into the dining-room.

"It's all right," she announced, breathless with pleasure. "Arthur will take me. But he wants me to come home at twelve o'clock, so I shall do so, of course."

She was surprised and pleased at her own virtue in so readily making this concession of two hours. Gladys beamed with relief, and Mr. West's brow cleared.

Bertha spent the afternoon in luxurious preparations for the dance. She lay for several hours on the dining-room couch, sleeping and courting sleep, in order to be fresh for the evening's event. When at length the time wore on to an hour when she might reasonably do so, she commanded the housemaid to light a fire in her bedroom, and, going presently upstairs, she took the soft lacy garments she was to wear carefully from their swathing tissue paper and laid them in a silken row upon the hearth to warm. She assembled her scent and her powder-puff and her diamond pendant and her rings and the square of silk lace which was her evening handkerchief with the

luxurious enjoyment of one collecting tools in order to begin a work of art.

The hands of her expensive silver travelling-clock ticked on with what seemed to Bertha a perverse slowness, but at length it was seven o'clock, and Bertha stood, scented and powdered and curled, before the mirror, admiring the fairy-like shimmering of her new frock. She took up her handglass and inspected herself in detail. Every wavy black hair was in the place which Bertha had assigned to it, and Bertha's smooth, unblemished shoulders rose like polished ivory from the perfectly fitting neck of her frock. It had taken the flighty parlourmaid twenty minutes by the clock to make the neck fit perfectly by means of safety pins; but now that it was done, Bertha considered the result worth the time and trouble. She gave a last despairing dab at her detested freckles with her powder-puff, and went downstairs into her father's study, where the family were seated round the fire, to display herself and obtain admiration. Mrs. West looked at her daughter's smooth prettiness with mingled pride and shrinking.

"You look very pretty, love," she said fondly. But in her heart of hearts she really would have preferred a less calculated beauty—pink-and-white cheeks and fluffy, loosely-done hair were more to her taste, though she admitted that Bertha could look very *distinguée*.

"I hope you'll have a good time," said Gladys, still a little remorseful at her desertion of her sister.

Bertha smiled in superior fashion and enveloped herself in her opera cloak.

2.

Precisely at this minute the telephone bell rang in Beech Holm, the house of William Irwell's mother. Ernest Irwell answered the call—the 'phone was in a small room generally called his study—and sent up word to his brother that he was wanted. William was dressing and just about to arrange his white tie; he ran downstairs

with its ends flapping, commented jocularly upon this to his mother, and went with brisk cheerfulness into the now empty study and took up the receiver.

"Hullo!" he said loudly, with a cheerful inflection quite unlike the tone he used when telephoning on business subjects.

"Is that you, William?" came from the other end.

William's heart sank; he recognized the voice of his previous father-in-law, and had a vague presentiment of evil.

"Yes, Sir Melfield," he replied.

"I've had a letter," continued his father-in-law in a weak, agitated voice, "from Violet."

There was a pause.

"Well?" said William coldly.

"You know I don't usually hear from her," said Sir Melfield; "though of course she writes to Isabel sometimes. Well—it appears her husband's dead."

The blood rose into William's head at the word "husband."

"When did he die?" he asked huskily. He did not in the least wish to know, but in the tumult of his feelings it was the only thing he could think of to say. There was a short pause, during which William had a mental picture of the white-haired old man turning over the pages of a letter with uncertain, impatient fingers.

"A fortnight ago—about—I think; it doesn't much matter," Sir Melfield said testily at length. "Influenza. The question is—what's to become of her?"

"Has she enough to live on?" asked William brutally.

Sir Melfield made a protesting sound.

"I expect so," he said irritably. "She has her mother's money. I can make her an allowance if necessary. But she can't go wandering about in hotels and boarding-houses by herself—she isn't fit for it. She must have a paid companion, or make some such arrangement. Agatha will be coming home from school for good this Christmas—she's been at Charford for the past four years,

but she's eighteen now and it's time she came home—so I couldn't possibly have Violet back in Hudley again; it would never do."

At these words a violent rage took possession of William Irwell's heart, but whether his rage was against Violet, or Sir Melfield, or Sir Melfield's youngest daughter Agatha, or even perhaps against himself, he did not know.

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?" he asked roughly.

"I thought you would wish to be the first in Hudley to hear the news," came the dignified reply.

"I'll come round to-morrow evening and talk it over with you," said William, sick at heart.

"Why not to-night?" suggested Sir Melfield.

"Because I'm going out," said William angrily. He was about to ring off in a fury when he remembered something he wished to say. "Don't mention the news to anyone yet," he begged, in accordance with that Hudleian pride which will violate every law of heaven and earth rather than reveal to the public its wounds. Hudleians will tell their joys, but rarely confide their sorrows; they boast their wealth, but conceal their poverty with a stubborn fierceness.

"As you please," said Sir Melfield in an indifferent tone. "To-morrow, then."

William left the telephone and returned to his room. Mentally he cursed his former wife; he thought it only too probable that if she were left to herself she would take the primrose path to perdition with light-hearted inconsequence. He slipped a hand into a drawer and jerked out a red leather case which contained her photograph, but threw it petulantly away without looking at it. Clearer than any photograph was the picture in his mind of Violet—her fair, high-piled hair, her rather prominent eyes, her long thin nose, her foolish simper; she was not a beautiful woman, but she gave a dazzling impression of beauty, elegance, fascination. She was the female of man, and nothing more; but she was that so essentially,

so egregiously, so completely, that men unfailingly hovered about her and desired her.

"Does old Melfield think I'm going to marry her again?" William demanded fiercely of his reflection in the dressing-table mirror. He wrestled impatiently with his tie, and the juxtaposition in his thoughts of his divorced wife and his white evening tie did not strike him as humorous. "I'm going to marry Bertha West," he declared firmly. Bertha meant, to him, common sense, respectability, a good position; she was attractive enough to please any man, but had not that fatal incomprehensible fascination of the idiotic Violet. "Violet isn't half as good looking as Bertha West," William told himself truthfully. He pushed the leather case angrily back into the drawer, thrust a handful of money into his pocket, and picked up the red rosette he was to wear in token of his office. "I shall be confoundedly late instead of early, as I meant to be. Shouldn't wonder if Bertha's programme is full when I get there."

To his surprise, relief came to him at the thought that he might not be able to dance with Bertha that night. This was immediately succeeded by a feeling of being unbearably thwarted in his plans. How could he ask Bertha West to-night to marry him, as he had intended, on top of such news as this? It could not be done; such a proceeding would be indecent. Would to Heaven Sir Melfield had kept his news until the morning!

"I should have been safely engaged to Bertha by then," he muttered, running angrily downstairs. His mind dwelt for a moment on Bertha. The image of his wife stirred him to fury, but the thought of Bertha nauseated rather than consoled him. He groaned.

"I'm in a deuce of a hurry," he said irritably to his chauffeur. "Get a move on."

He flung himself into one corner of his electric landaulette, and sat moodily there, his arms folded across his breast, while the chauffeur drove much too fast to the Town Hall.

3.

Meanwhile the Wests' car stood silently before the gate of number 27, Prince's Road Terrace, the small house where Arthur West lived. There were no lights in the front of the house when it arrived, and the door did not immediately open and disgorge Arthur, as Bertha had hoped. After waiting a few moments the chauffeur discreetly sounded his horn once or twice. There was a further pause. Again the chauffeur hooted. Bertha, who was beginning to feel cold, leaned angrily out of the window.

"Go and ring the bell," she commanded crossly. "I shall be fearfully late."

The chauffeur obeyed. The door opened, and Marjorie West ran down the steps and into the road.

"I'm so frightfully sorry, Bertha," she breathed through the open window. "Arthur came home so late! But he's nearly ready now—he's just winding his scarf round his neck." She stopped suddenly and began again on an entirely new note: "I hear you've got a wondrous new frock, Bertha; is it permitted to peep?" She put out an eager hand, and gently drew back the front of Bertha's cloak. "Oh, Bertha!" she exclaimed, in a burst of admiration. "You *do* look lovely!"

"I hope Arthur won't be long," said Bertha coldly, very much annoyed at this irruption of an entirely new atmosphere into her wonderful evening.

"I hope not," vaguely agreed Marjorie, who was sensitive to changes in atmosphere and knew that Bertha was displeased. Suddenly, "I'll go and see!" she announced as though it were the most wonderful idea in the world. She bounded up the steps, and could be heard calling "Arthur!" and having a sudden spasm of laughter.

"What will Jenkinson"—the chauffeur—"think of her?" Bertha inquired of the car's ceiling, tapping her foot impatiently on its skin rug.

Arthur now appeared in the doorway, buttoning his coat.

"I shall be home at twelve," he observed in a resigned voice to his wife. "Good-bye." He climbed, grunting, into the car. "Hullo!" he greeted Bertha unenthusiastically.

The car started.

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Bertha, whose nerves were on edge with the delay.

The entrance to the Town Hall was red-carpeted; and there were lights and a crowd and respectful commissionaires. Bertha allowed her cloak to slip so as to give the assembled watchers a glimpse of her dress; Arthur, noticing the soiled clothes and cheerless faces of many of the spectators, felt ashamed of his participation in this luxurious folly of a "charity" dance, and pulled up his coat collar morosely about his ears. The two negotiated their respective cloak-rooms and met in a wide corridor, where palms shivered in draughty corners and a small table held two trays of programmes. The brother and sister entered the hall together; they made a fine pair, though Arthur's good-humoured face looked pale, tired, and rugged beside his sister's artificial prettiness. Bertha was quivering with excitement; she glanced about, greeted her friends, and revelled in the metropolitan elegance of her toilet. Her quick eye had already seen William Irwell, who was speaking to the leader of the orchestra. He turned and came towards them. Bertha's heart leaped.

William Irwell's face was flushed, he had heavy lines under his eyes, and his mouth looked sulky. He greeted Bertha conventionally and took her programme. (In Hudley the custom of taking a dance partner with you and dancing with him or her all the evening, while acknowledged and practised to a certain extent, was not universal, and the Mr. Wests of the town did not approve of it.) Bertha averted her head and carried on a sprightly conversation with Arthur, meanwhile praying that William would take the supper dance.

"Thank you," said William. He returned the programme and withdrew.

The supper dance was still a blank. He had written his initials beside two dances, one in each half of the programme. Two! Only two! Bertha could have cast herself upon Arthur's familiar neck and cried with humiliation. Instead, she smiled benignly at a young cousin of hers—a West from Denbridge, an outlying suburb of Hudley—and graciously granted him the supper dance.

"Perhaps William will ask me to sit out that first dance with him," she thought gloomily, making bright remarks to her first partner and steering him skilfully out of danger as they danced slowly down the now crowded hall.

Unfortunately William's dance was a lamentable failure. To begin with, he did not succeed in finding Bertha till half the dance had gone, alleging as an excuse his duties as M.C. The actual dancing was enjoyable, and William's sulky expression seemed slightly to relax; but unfortunately the music was not encored. As the couple were about to retire to the corridor, where there was sitting-out accommodation of a private kind, another red-rosetted man came up to William and swept him off to see the head waiter about some supper detail. Bertha was left sitting on a large ottoman, her loveliness wasted on desert air, breathing very hard, trying to smile, and longing to assure every passer-by that she had *not* lacked a partner for the preceding dance. Arthur came along.

"Hullo!" he said. "Been sitting out?"

"No," said Bertha with cold fury.

Arthur sat down beside his sister on the ottoman and began to make conversation, for which act of brotherly kindness Bertha felt grateful to him. Presently William returned, full of apologies, but absent and preoccupied. How could Bertha be feminine and seductive in Arthur's presence? Nothing destroys romance so much as a brother. William and Arthur began to discuss the wool market. Arthur disliked William, and his dislike was

reciprocated. It was a relief to all three when the music began again.

At supper the young West from Denbridge insisted on conducting Bertha to a table where sat his own particular young and giddy friends, who were six or seven years younger than Bertha, and correspondingly boring. William Irwell swept past them up the room with a young married lady on his arm, whose husband followed with a visitor. Bertha felt quite relieved to see that William's partner was at least married.

The hours passed slowly on until the programme reached William's second dance. This time things seemed better; he found the girl almost at once, the music was seductive, and she won a smile from him which was almost loverlike. The two secured fairly secluded seats in a balcony. Bertha's hopes were high.

"What do you think of the plants on the platform?" queried William. "There was such a fuss made at the committee meetings about not having enough."

"They're very nice," said Bertha faintly, without looking at them. Plants! He spoke to her of plants! She realized with a sick feeling of disappointment that this long-prepared-for, much-desired dance was not going to bring William Irwell one step nearer to her. Plants! Tears came into Bertha's eyes, and she averted her head so as to blink them away unperceived. Her distress was so real and poignant that for the moment it overwhelmed her intense egoism, and she became merely a rather feeble but much-to-be-pitied young girl. There was a long pause.

"You're very quiet to-night, William," said Bertha at length timidly.

"Yes," admitted William, fidgeting moodily with the buttons of his gloves.

He gazed absently into space, his mind full of haunting visions of his wife. He had sat beside her at dances so very many times, and she had prattled idiocies to him—little fool! he wished she were at the bottom of the sea. She was nothing to him. Bertha was exquisitely pretty,

especially just now in that drooping attitude. After all, why not ask her to marry him, ask her *now* before the news of Captain Bollam's death became public property, and thus settle the matter out of hand?

"Yes," said William aloud. "I'm afraid I'm rather absent-minded to-night. The fact is," he began—and wondered to himself: "Shall I tell her? She'll find out in a day or two whether I tell her or not. I may as well tell her—it will make a good opening"—"The fact is," he repeated aloud, "I've had news to-day that Violet's husband has just died of influenza."

Bertha turned pale. In a flash she imagined William and Violet reunited, herself the while deserted and alone. Her sentimental fancy painted horrid pictures of her desolation.

"Oh, he's dead," she said faintly, unable to pull herself together and make some sensible remark. "He's dead. I see."

William experienced a reaction; he violently regretted having given Bertha his confidence. His foolishness in the matter seemed to match his foolishness in losing his wife. He was without doubt a fool, a damned fool. The girl would spread the news all over Hudley. There wasn't a grain of sense in her. He looked inimically at Bertha, and said coldly:

"Of course, the news is quite private as yet."

Bertha had been unable to appreciate the compliment William had paid her by confiding in her, but she could and did appreciate the change in his voice and manner.

"He means to marry her again. That's why he didn't take me in to supper," she thought despairingly.

She was so sentimentally sorry for herself that her egotism returned, and with it came hurt pride and wounded vanity. Quite suddenly she felt that it was impossible to finish out the dance. She must find Arthur and go home at once; she could cut her remaining partners. Her hands sought the programme which lay upon her lap, and idly opened it. It was only eleven o'clock. She could not

bear another hour. Four partners—Arthur, the Denbridge cousin, two elderly married men. She looked about for Arthur.

William was now so excessively enraged with himself that to sit quietly there beside Bertha was more than he could endure. He wished that Violet, her husband, Sir Melfield, and Bertha, were all in hell.

“Bollam probably is,” he thought grimly, and smiled to himself at this bitter pleasantry.

The orchestra made itself heard in a tremendous chord.

“Shall we go down?” asked William in a formal tone. His formality was meant as a barrier to any remark about his Violet-confidence, and Bertha took it as such.

“Yes. The music has begun, I think,” said Bertha. To herself she thought: “I wish I hadn’t come. I wish I hadn’t bought a new dress. I owe Gladys the money for it. I wish I hadn’t come.”

They descended.

“Thank you,” said William with a little nod, not looking at Bertha.

“Thanks very much,” said Bertha in a high artificial tone; she called up all her courage and produced a strained smile.

William vanished into the ball-room.

Bertha pushed her way through the crowd towards Arthur, who was chatting to a girl cousin. She cleverly withdrew him without attracting notice, and then said abruptly:

“I want to go home. You must get me a taxi.”

Arthur looked astounded. “It’s only eleven,” he protested. Bertha turned from him impatiently. “Oh, very well,” said Arthur with the resigned air of one agreeing with masculine politeness to a feminine whim. “I’m sure I shall be glad to get home in decent time after all. Here’s your cloak-room ticket.” He pushed the slip of coloured paper into her hand, and strode off purposefully towards the entrance.

Bertha returned to the ball-room and found in succes-

sion her two elderly partners. Bending towards them with a bright flattering smile she gushed :

“ I’m so sorry—Arthur’s taking me home now—he will *insist* on this early hour—I booked the dances in the hope that he would relent, but he hasn’t !”

Her archly sorrowful upward glance as she uttered these last words was a triumph of dramatic art. The men duly uttered facetious and complimentary remarks, though they did not of course believe her excuses in the least. The girl slipped away, wrapped herself in her cloak with feverish hands, and went out and stood upon the steps of the hall with an air so wild and desolate that Arthur, returning with a following taxi, was quite struck by it. He assisted her into the vehicle.

“ Beech Lea,” he told the driver.

“ Prince’s Road Terrace,” contradicted Bertha shrilly from her corner.

“ I’d rather see you home first if you’re ill or anything,” objected Arthur, privately very much annoyed by Bertha and her whims.

“ It’s much shorter to go to your house first,” argued Bertha disagreeably.

“ Oh, very well,” said Arthur shortly. “ Prince’s Road Terrace.” He entered the car and slammed the door. There was a long minute while the taxi’s engine seemed to run up and down the gamut of noise, then the vehicle started with a jerk, turned the corner and flew noisily up Prince’s Road.

CHAPTER III

EUSTACE HOLLINS

1

BERTHA'S apparent capriciousness had a motive. If she arrived at Beech Lea much before twelve o'clock Mr. and Mrs. West and Gladys would naturally be very much surprised by her early return. They would probably ask questions. At the moment Bertha could not invent a convincing explanation of her unusual action, and she shrank painfully from questions on the subject. She hoped that the taxi would break down or that somehow something would happen to delay her arrival at Beech Lea. As they passed a street lamp she looked at her watch; it was barely ten minutes past eleven. The taxi drew up at her brother's house.

"I'll come in with you for a few minutes, Arthur," she said desperately.

Arthur, who had been expecting a speedy release from the tiresome Bertha and a return to the congenial society of his wife, could not entirely suppress an exasperated sigh at this remark. Bertha heard the sigh and understood its cause; tears swam in her eyes as she descended from the taxi and followed her brother up the steps to his door. She felt neglected, lonely, miserable, and deeply humiliated by her present necessity of forcing herself upon people who did not want her. But to return home meant the exposure of her feelings to her family. She chose the lesser of two evils, and stood shivering on the stone steps, the cold striking up through her thin shoes and piercing the open fabric of her cloak. A man was standing by the house door and had just, so he told Arthur, rung the bell.

"What an extraordinary hour of the night to call!"

thought Bertha, and unconsciously she planned how she could relate this startling incident to her father as an evidence of the peculiar habits of Arthur's household. Mr. West would look grieved and press eagerly for further details.

The door of the house was now opened by Marjorie, and there were exclamations and greetings, to which Bertha, sick at heart, made curt replies. The four turned into the front room, where Marjorie had apparently been sewing; more lights were switched on, the fire was broken up, and Bertha was hospitably pressed into a large cretonne-covered arm-chair by the hearth.

"We'd better have some supper. Bertha, do you take cocoa? I'll just make some," said Marjorie, folding up her sewing and preparing to leave the room.

"You stay where you are," said Arthur, waving a detaining hand. "I can make cocoa as well as you any day. Hollins, have some beer?"

"Thanks," replied the visitor.

Arthur left the room; he could be faintly heard using the telephone in the hall and then moving about in the kitchen.

Marjorie sank into a chair opposite Bertha and stretched her feet luxuriously towards the fire. Bertha surveyed her with disfavour. She was clad in a floppy blue-and-brown garment of quite unfashionable shape—though its colours, Bertha felt bound to admit, heightened the burnished tints of Marjorie's gleaming brown hair and showed to advantage the warm white of her neck and arms. Her long not pretty face with its mobile mouth and expressive eyebrows and its look of eager, humorous enjoyment was to-night pale and weary, and her body sagged in the chair with a comfortable abandon which Bertha considered very unbecoming in a married woman with two children. Bertha sighed. She did not feel equal to-night to the task of coping with her sister-in-law. Marjorie West was renowned in Hudley partly because she, the daughter of a man who drove carts for a grocer's shop and a woman

who had done charing, had possessed herself of an honourable degree of the University of London and married a scion of the powerful and conceited West family without any assistance whatever from anybody except the moral backing of that cousin of the Wests whom Gladys had visited in London. The chief cause of her celebrity, however, lay in her manner of doing these things. Her wedding day having been fixed for the twenty-fourth of October, she electrified the West family by gaily departing to London on the thirteenth of that month to sit for her final examination. She finished her last paper at five o'clock on the twenty-third, caught the six o'clock northern express, reached Hudley at eleven, and was duly married at two o'clock next day amid the stupefied disapprobation of her new relatives. This adventure tickled the Hudleian palate, and whenever the name of West was mentioned the story was sure to be related with an accompaniment of admiring chuckles and knowing shakes of the head. Arthur was inordinately proud of his wife's achievements, and since Bonnie's birth even Mr. West grudgingly conceded a certain amount of admiration to his daughter-in-law's spirit.

It was not to be expected that Bertha would have anything in common with a girl capable of such outrageous actions, and, indeed, Bertha frankly hated entering her brother's house. She hated this room, its large, sprawly paper, its cretonne window-seat, its oak chest, its polished oval table, its lustre bowls wherein stood green shoots destined to become pink tulips and Roman hyacinths; most of all she hated its books, which overflowed from the bookcase on to the tables and chairs and sometimes even on to the mantelpiece and the floor. Marjorie seemed to consider that books were in their right place wherever one chose to put them. Bertha thought that books should be put away carefully in a carved bookcase with curled legs—or, if you wanted the room to look "clever," one or two suède-backed poets in a neat pile on a small table were permissible.

Bertha thought cocoa a plebeian beverage suitable for consumption by parlourmaids only, and she was horrified at Arthur's mention of beer. Mr. West and his wife were lifelong teetotalers; at dances Bertha drank champagne; therefore to her both these things seemed right and permissible, but to drink beer put one outside the pale. She sighed again, shivered, and felt certain that to-morrow she would have a terrible cold.

"Well, how did you like it?" inquired the visitor of Marjorie, touching a green-backed book which lay on the table at his elbow.

"Oh, immensely," replied Marjorie, folding her arms and sinking still further into her chair. "Rather primitive, of course; these Scandinavians usually are. Thanks awfully for bringing it; I'm sure I don't know what we should do at present without you to bring us books, Eustace. I haven't a second to spare to run round to the library, and Arthur's so tired just now when he gets home—there's trouble at the works, you know—that he hasn't the energy for anything. His sole evening amusement for the past fortnight has been to sit by the fire reading the *Hudley News* and trying to pick out which bits you've written." She gave him a bright sparkle: "It has, I assure you."

Eustace Hollins coloured and smiled a little secret smile to himself as if someone were teasing him gently upon a subject very dear to his heart. He then shook his head at Marjorie, who laughed, much amused, and, turning to Bertha, changed the subject with:

"Tell us about the dance, Bertha."

"Oh, it was most enjoyable," lied Bertha. "Is Mr. Hollins on the staff of the *News*?" she asked, simulating an intense interest which she did not in the least feel—a reporter with the essentially Hudleian name of Hollins, clothed in ancient tweeds, a soft collar and massive brogues, could not possibly interest Bertha, though he had a melodious voice and a southern accent—but she had to evade Marjorie's interest in the dance somehow.

"Well, yes—at least, no," replied Eustace, colouring

with mingled pleasure and embarrassment. "You see—the fact is, I——"

"He writes bits for them in his spare time," explained Marjorie, helping him out.

"Really?" said Bertha.

"I'm at the Municipal Institute all day, you see," observed Mr. Hollins.

"Oh, you teach there," said Bertha, privately much bored. Teachers at municipal institutes were not for her. "Does Arthur still go fussing off there in the evenings to give engineering classes or something?" she inquired disagreeably of Marjorie.

"Yes. That's how I met him—at least, it's some time since I first met him, you understand," explained Eustace melodiously. He seemed ridiculously particular about the accuracy of his statements. "But I originally met your brother at the Institute."

"I see," said Bertha with simulated thoughtfulness. Her eyes wandered to the clock.

"Arthur's an unconscionable time with the cocoa!" observed Marjorie, bounding suddenly from her seat. "I'll go and see what's happened to him." She laughed ringingly. "He's probably drowned himself in the beer-barrel—like Clarence in the butt of malmsey wine. What is malmsey wine? Do you know, Eustace? I always wonder if his feet stuck straight up out of the top of the barrel, and who first found him—Clarence, I mean, of course, not Arthur."

"Shall I clear the table or anything?" inquired Eustace helpfully.

"No. Sit perfectly still and talk prettily to Bertha," commanded Marjorie.

Eustace raised his eyebrows and gave a deprecating smile. For the first time Bertha looked at him. She perceived that he had fair thick wavy hair, much rumped, a finely-curved mouth, and grey eyes which looked as though they could twinkle upon occasion; that his hands were long and well-shaped; and that his face had that same

quality of joyous vitality and eager searching which was stamped upon Marjorie's features, and, in a less degree, upon Bonnie's small round face. Bertha also perceived the admiration in Eustace Hollins's eyes, and a warm soothing current flowed through her body. Her misery and loneliness diminished, and Eustace Hollins rose from the status of a reporter to that of a man, capable of being charmed. It was such an intense relief to find that somebody could admire her even if William Irwell did not! Bertha brightened and smiled, and decided that she would take off her cloak—in which she was still swathed—and allow Eustace a glimpse of the splendours beneath.

"Let me hang it up for you," said Eustace, jumping up as she began to struggle with the cloak's folds.

He took it from her hands and left the room to hang it up in the small hall. Bertha gave a little sigh of enjoyment and returning life, and, looking into the fire, pretended to fall into a reverie. Eustace re-entered the room. Her lavender and silver frock harmonized exquisitely with the roses and lilac of the chintz chair-cover; her round white arms curved gently down into her lap, her body drooped forward like a flower overweighted by its own beauty. With a thrill of pleasure the man noted the clear oval of her face, her dreamy eyes, the long black lashes which lay on her pale cheeks, the powdering of fawn freckles which gave character and beauty to her prettiness, the soft movement of her breast, rising and falling under its thin covering of filmy silk and lace—to Eustace she seemed delicate and fragile as old china, or like some conventional Academy picture of a great lady as she sat there in her pale falling silks, the firelight gleaming on the smooth shining waves of her dark hair. She started prettily at his approach, and lifted her eyes to his with a half-smile.

Eustace Hollins promptly fell in love with her.

It was not a very serious matter for Eustace to fall in love; he had already done it some seven or eight times without any particular consequences resulting either to

himself or to the objects of his affection. He was much too shy and self-depreciating ever to tell his love. For two or three days the passion would burn within him—he would be unable to eat or to sleep properly, would be filled with enthusiasm and ecstasy, and feel positive that this at last was really love—and within a week would have forgotten his innamorata utterly and completely in favour of an idea for a story or the discovery of a congenial novelist whose works he had not yet read. Beauty of line or colouring seized upon him and shook him and drove him to read Persian poetry in a rapture of appreciation, but he had never been sufficiently intimate with any woman to love one in the usual sense of the word. However, while his emotions lasted they were real enough.

He seated himself and gazed silently at Bertha, not liking to disturb the reverie into which he imagined she had returned. His admiring glance was meat and drink to the girl; it made her feel young and pretty and fascinating, and restored her self-respect, which had been badly damaged by William Irwell's disturbing conduct.

Marjorie entered the room bearing a tray on which were cups and plates and several varieties of cakes; Arthur followed her, precariously balancing glasses and bottles of beer in one hand and holding a cheese dish in the other. These articles were rapidly spread out on the oval table. Bertha disliked this kind of improvised meal intensely, but she partook of the hot cocoa in the hope of warding off the cold which she felt to be imminent. The others suddenly developed surprisingly large appetites, and the meal proceeded gaily. Bertha was silent, listening with a kind of mildly benevolent contempt to the absurd conversation of the other three, who had begun to discuss the modern novel—a subject on which Eustace could usually be trusted to talk for hours. To-night, however, he was a trifle distraught, being privately engaged in trying to find an adjective descriptive of the colour of Bertha's freckles, and not succeeding very well. Presently the talk turned to the "trouble" at Arthur's works.

There had been intermittent "trouble" at the works of Messrs. Broaddykes, one of Hudley's great engineering firms, for the past year. Bertha, of course, always accepted the view held by her father and William Irwell, that the men's demands in this and every other case were preposterous and would ruin the country if acceded to. These three seemed to take an entirely different view of the matter.

"What nonsense all these people talk!" thought Bertha, her eyes narrowing with impotent scorn—it was no use attempting to argue with Arthur and Marjorie, they knew such quantities of statistics and had an awkward habit of twisting things round—asking, for example, whether Bertha would like to have been born a working man's daughter. "Why can't they leave things comfortably as they are? They've no common sense. No practical common sense. Full of wild theories."

A motor-horn sounded loudly outside the windows.

"Heavens!" shrieked Bertha, wide-eyed with alarm. "Arthur! That isn't the taxi standing there still, is it? You haven't let him wait all this time for me, surely?"

"Good Lord, no!" replied Arthur placidly. "I sent him away when we arrived here. It's quite all right," he continued, reading Bertha's question in her eyes and answering it. "I telephoned Jenkinson long ago and told him to come round here for you. Don't you know the sound of your own car's hooter yet?"

"Did you give the message at the house or ask to be put through to the garage?" asked Bertha anxiously.

"Garage," said Arthur.

Bertha sighed with relief.

"I suppose I'd better be going," she remarked, rising. "My cloak's in the hall."

Marjorie fetched the gorgeous velvet cloak and wrapped it round Bertha with a motherly air.

"Pretty child!" she said admiringly, holding the fur edges of the cloak together with her hands and looking smilingly into Bertha's face.

Bertha was annoyed. "Child," indeed! She was a

year older than Marjorie. Was she to be called a child merely because she was yet unmarried? She did not return her sister-in-law's kiss, and her thanks to Arthur for taking her to the dance were cold and perfunctory.

"You'd better take Hollins along with you and drop him at the corner of Derwent Terrace," suggested Arthur, opening the front door and revealing a cold starlight night.

"Oh, pray don't trouble—it really isn't very far," demurred Eustace, yearning to be contradicted.

"I shall be delighted," smiled Bertha, descending to the gate.

Eustace joyously followed her into the car and sat down beside her. The soft white fur of her cloak lay against the back of his hand. During the two minutes' drive to Derwent Terrace he played with this sensation of the fur—pretending that he did not feel it, that it was nothing to him; then admitting that the feel of the fur was pleasant, but of course not significant; then revelling in the profoundly important and meaning fact that this fur which touched him was Bertha's fur, and edged the thick velvet which hung in stiff rich folds about Bertha's shoulders. There was a bit of Rupert Brooke's about fur somewhere—probably in "The Great Lover." He would look it up when he reached home. Not that he intended to go home just yet—his sensations were too rich and marvellous to be enclosed in the walls that held his family; they would need to be tamed and flattened before they could stoop to Derwent Terrace.

The car slowed down and came to a standstill. Eustace dismounted.

"Awfully good of you to give me a lift, Miss West," he said, closing the door and leaning against it, loath to leave the picture of Bertha's face.

"Not at all," replied Bertha, to whom conventionalisms always came swiftly and naturally.

Jenkinson, who was anxious to get home to bed, put in the clutch, and the car purred majestically away to Beech Lea.

To Bertha's intense relief the rest of her family had

retired to bed. Jenkinson admitted her to the house with a latchkey. As she undressed before the dying fire in her bedroom her thoughts dwelt with pleasurable excitement upon Eustace Hollins. He was to Bertha what a new world would have been to Alexander—something new to conquer. Of course, he was barely a gentleman; but he was not bad looking, he had an excellent southern accent, and he was sufficiently alive and passionate to make a splendid foil to William Irwell.

Towards the latter gentleman Bertha's feelings were mixed. At the bottom of her heart she loved William Irwell and meant to marry him in spite of all the Violet Bollams in the world; but mingled with this permanent affection there was a temporary but strong feeling of hostility and a determination to irritate and provoke him by means of Eustace Hollins or anything else that happened to be handy as much as she could without jeopardizing her matrimonial schemes. He should see what it meant to provoke Bertha West.

As she mused upon these things in bed, the light out, her dark hair tightly plaited to assist its wave, her face smeared with cold cream to keep her skin smooth, she felt a certain amount of gratitude to Eustace Hollins for having rescued her from her own particular Slough of Despond. But for him and his admiration the goffered frills of her pillow would even now be wet with unavailing tears. She decided to help Eustace Hollins, to "push" him and "run" him and bring him forward; in his position it should prove quite an advantage to him to know her. As for William Irwell and his Violet—a dark flush spread over Bertha's face, and in spite of herself she shed a few scalding tears.

2.

The general unsatisfactoriness of Eustace Hollins's present position and prospects was due partially to the recent war, but chiefly to his mother's capricious selfishness and his own habit of self-depreciation. As a lad he

had won a scholarship to Manchester Grammar School, and he was doing well there and working for a scholarship to Oxford when his mother decided that he ought to come home and learn his father's business. His father, Charles Ernest John Hollins—there are so many Hollinses in Hudley that one is obliged to descend to the third Christian name in order to distinguish individuals—was a manufacturer (of cloth understood) in a very small way. He was a small, fair, rubicund man, jovial and a trifle foolish. Mrs. Hollins was stout and square and dark, an unbeautiful woman with a mole on one cheek, well-marked, bushy eyebrows, steel spectacles, and an extraordinary capacity for getting her own way. Eustace did not resemble either of his parents; he was generally understood to be like his deceased paternal grandfather, who had been a member of the original committee formed to consider the founding of the Hudley Municipal Institute, a kind of technical college where every possible subject, from the dyeing of textiles to the appreciation of Russian literature, could be studied at absurdly small fees. The Institute was the darling project and lifelong work of the mayor who presided over that committee; and, from the first broaching of the matter until his scheme at last took shape in bricks and mortar, he had, in the face of much opposition, the active, loyal, and unswerving support of old Mr. Hollins. Consequently their names were great in Hudley—or at least in that section of Hudley which believed in the value of education. Mrs. Hollins did not belong to that section; she grudged the time and the money which her father-in-law had “wasted” on another man's scheme, and was determined there should be no more of that sort of thing in the family if she could help it.

Eustace had been home about eighteen months, studying the manufacture of cloth, when his father received an offer of purchase for his business. It was a good offer, and trade at that time was having a bad spell, so that the matter needed consideration; but Mr. Hollins was not inclined to sell his business because he wished to leave it

to Eustace. (The difference in Hudley between the social position and prospects of young men who have a business to enter which will eventually be their own, and those who have not, is enormous.) It so happened, however, that about this time one of Mrs. Hollins's brothers failed in business rather badly, losing some of his sister's money in the process. Mrs. Hollins was seized with panic, implored her husband to sell his business and invest the money safely, and nagged at him till he did so. Eustace was told that he could continue his promising scholastic career and enter a profession. The now fixed income of the family was not large enough to send him to a University, so he hung about at home for some time, and then, taking advantage of an unexpected opportunity, went off to Marseilles, where he taught English in a small French school and enjoyed himself immensely. When he had been there a few months his father had a seizure and died. Eustace returned for the funeral and found that his mother took it for granted that he would remain in Hudley and contribute to the support of herself and his two sisters. Eustace, who had tasted the delights of liberty, had no desire whatever to live in Hudley with his family, but as he always accepted other people's judgments in preference to his own—except in literature—he sent to Marseilles for his books and began to look about for something to do in Hudley. The war found him in that position. On returning from it he managed to get taken on at the Municipal Institute as a very minor teacher of French, the Institute's Principal thus paying a debt of gratitude which he owed to Eustace's grandfather—who had helped to appoint him to his present post many years ago—and the Institute's committee being very ready to engage a Hollins who was also an ex-service man.

Eustace's ambitions lay towards authorship. He wrote short stories, short articles, short plays, and very occasionally had one accepted. He was also writing a book, which proceeded slowly under his alternate spasms of inspired delirium and abysmal self-depreciation. His

present desire was to be on the staff of a newspaper ; not that he meant to adopt the calling of journalism permanently, but because he felt that in it alone he would gain the necessary experience and learn the technique of his craft. At the moment he thankfully did whatever scraps of work fell his way from the editorial table of the *Hudley News*, and hoped that some day he would be granted " more scope." Meanwhile he read avidly, wrote when he got the chance, and had bouts of conscientiousness over his teaching and bouts of absolute carelessness. He rather lacked singleness of purpose and was too much given to sudden rash enthusiasms, but he had ideals and standards which were high above Bertha's comprehension, and a capacity for deliberate and clear-sighted self-sacrifice which that young lady would have thought foolish if indeed she credited it at all.

Eustace strolled about now under the stars and thought of Bertha's prettiness. He was sorry she had such an ugly Yorkshire accent, just as he would have been sorry to see an otherwise beautiful child marred by some deformity. He was sorry, too, that she seemed to have no intellect and to take narrow views of things, and out of his own broad-mindedness he really pitied her for her own sake. But how pretty she was ! What ridiculously shaped but yet fascinating clothes she wore ! A pity that such lovely stuffs should be so unworthily hacked about ! He began his frequent occupation of wondering how such a person could be fitted into an ideal state, and concluded by deciding that in such a state Bertha would not wish to wear clothes like that—she would be a wiser, better woman. He shivered suddenly, and, remembering that he had some exercises to correct for the morrow, turned his steps homeward, groped his way along the private road, Derwent Terrace, and was fumbling with his latchkey in the door when to his surprise it gave under his touch and opened, revealing his elder sister Lizzie in a pink flannelette dressing-gown.

Lizzie was a thin, almost emaciated woman in the

thirties; her face was yellow and angular, with a little unexpected patch of colour on her cheekbones. In the daytime she wore, like her mother, steel spectacles, which she constantly moved up and down by wrinkling her nose or by a little sideways tap with the first finger of her right hand. In the daytime, too, she wore odd scraps of lace round her neck to fill up the V of her blouses; the lace never "sat" properly, and she constantly pulled at it and fidgeted with it. Now the collar of her flannel night-dress had escaped above her dressing-gown; she pushed it down with fingers ashake with nervousness, and reached up to pat her scanty dark hair. Her constant tremulous fidgeting nearly drove Eustace frantic, though his own fingers were scarcely ever still—the restlessness was a common heritage from their father. Lizzie adored Eustace and believed in him firmly; Mrs. Hollins and Daisy—the youngest member of the family—loved Eustace, but despised him for his self-depreciation and his ridiculous ideas; and Mrs. Hollins and Daisy were articulate and coherent, and gave their opinions without fear of God or man, whereas Lizzie was unconnected and tremulous in her speech, and feared her mother greatly.

"You *are* late, Eustace," said Lizzie, tremulously glad to see him, and shivering in the cold night air.

Eustace shut the door, genuinely concerned that she should be up so late. He rebuked her fraternally on this point.

"I was lying awake, and I heard you coming along the terrace," said Lizzie. "So I just thought I'd come down and let you in." She sniffed, wrinkling up her nose in the manner Eustace so detested.

The two crept like conspirators up the first staircase to the door of Lizzie's room, where Eustace kissed her very quietly, and left her silently for fear his mother should waken and demand explanations. Then he went up a story higher, carefully avoiding the aspidistra which stood on an insecure round table on the top landing. As he neared the threshold of his room his spirits,

depressed by his entry into the atmosphere of his home, rose joyfully. He entered his bedroom, groped to his dressing-table and lighted two candles which stood there. His mother objected strongly, and Eustace thought reasonably, to his habit of late reading on the score of large gas bills; so with Lizzie's connivance he kept a secret supply of candles, and, having smuggled upstairs two wooden candlesticks whose shape pleased him, he provided himself with light from his own purse.

Eustace's bedroom was a large apartment with a sloping ceiling and a small pointed window. The furniture and bed coverings were all articles which were supposed to be too shabby to appear in the other parts of the house. Eustace had bought himself a cheap rickety table, on which stood a small old-fashioned flat desk which had belonged to his father, and his school-books and papers. Above the iron bedstead hung, in a wooden frame, a glazed paper on which was printed :

A GREAT IDEAL IS THE PECULIAR ATTRIBUTE OF YOUTH

If a man has no aspirations after the pure and good when he is 25 he is not likely to possess them afterwards. Some young men who are nearing the thirties, and have made no record of solid and enduring work, ought to be roused by the examples of men who have triumphed while yet young. Do you know that Charles James Fox was in Parliament at 19, that Gladstone was Lord of the Treasury at 24, that Peel was in Parliament at 21, and that Palmerston was Lord of the Admiralty at 23? Do you say that these men were exceptional men? My dear sir, men with ideals are the exception ever and always. There is no need to wait till you are doddering and disabled before you make your mark. If you are going to do anything,—fix your ideal now and make for it at the first opportunity.

This had been a present to Eustace as a child from his grandfather ; it had inspired all his youthful efforts, and even now had the power to sting him into action by its horrible remarks on age. Eustace himself was twenty-five—a year younger than Bertha—and he would occasionally ask himself searchingly where *his* “record of solid and enduring work” was, and shake his fist at the offending parchment and begin to write with tremendous zeal.

Eustace, of course, possessed a bookcase, from which, as from Marjorie West’s, the books overflowed in all directions. (It must be confessed that Eustace was untidy ; his untidiness was the cause of his banishment to these upper regions.) He stooped over the bookcase and fidgeted about for his Rupert Brooke ; a book slithered on to the floor. Eustace swore softly, and remained in the same position, still and tense, for a few seconds. There came no sound of movement from below ; he sighed with relief and laid his hand upon the book he desired. Turning to “The Great Lover,” he propped the book up, open, on his dressing-table beneath the yellow glimmer of the friendly candles, and proceeded to undress. Where was that bit about the fur ?

“The benison of hot water ; furs to touch.”

Disappointing ! Oh, disappointing ! He had thought there was more than that. He read the poem through, thrilling with pleasure at each perfectly expressed item of the catalogue of loved delights. Then he remembered that Rupert Brooke had once written that he wanted to “kiss a thousand girls,” and decided that he personally should rather like to include Bertha in his thousand. He remembered the glancing shimmer of her frock—lavender which inexplicably shaded into old rose, the material was what experts called “shot silk,” he believed—against the deep rich hues of the chintz, and felt a joyous shiver of purely impersonal delight run through him. He surveyed the pile of exercise books which decked his table, and

decided not to spoil a beautiful evening by correcting them. Presently he cast himself into bed, making the springs creak abominably in his joy in feeling

“ . . . the cool kindliness of sheets, that soon
Smooth away trouble ; and the rough male kiss
Of blankets.”

The thought of making love seriously to Bertha West with a view to marrying her never entered his head.

CHAPTER IV

PROGRESS OF EUSTACE

1.

THE next day Bertha had a bad cold and a temperature, as she had foreseen. It was very tiresome to be obliged to lie in bed and do nothing while Violet Bollam's schemes to marry William Irwell went gaily along in the world outside her bedroom. Bertha thought a good deal about William as she lay there hot and headachey, and her thoughts made her restless and more feverish than she need have been. In the afternoon Gladys sat with her for a short time and tried to make cheerful conversation; then the front door bell rang and Gladys went downstairs to receive the caller, and did not return. The short winter afternoon drew to its close; the daylight faded, the fire died down; Bertha began to feel neglected, and to wonder how much longer she was to be left alone. Her resentment grew momentarily, and she was on the point of ringing the bell and demanding her mother's presence when the door opened and Mrs. West came placidly in.

"Well, love, have you had a nice sleep?" she inquired in a motherly tone, mending the fire, drawing down the blinds, and shaking up Bertha's pillows.

"No, I haven't been to sleep at all," replied Bertha crossly. "You *have* been away a long time, mother! Who was it who called?"

"It was Isabel," replied Mrs. West, settling herself in an arm-chair by the fire for a gossip. "I've been reading the Beyrout letter to her; that's why I've been so long."

Bertha's elder sister had married an electrical engineer, who, at the time of their marriage, had been proceeding

to a post in Constantinople ; he was now laying cables in Beyrout.

" I didn't know there *was* a new Beyrout letter," said Bertha, annoyed that she had been left in ignorance of this fact.

" It only came this morning," replied Mrs. West, unruffled. " What was the dance like last night? Tell me all about it."

Bertha gave a barren and inaccurate sketch of the previous night's proceedings, concluding :

" I went into Arthur's for a few minutes on the way home. What had Isabel to say? Anything?"

" The doctor says Bobbie will be quite well enough to go back to school next term," began Mrs. West. Bobbie was Robert West's eldest child ; he had had an attack of pneumonia a month or two ago and had recovered from it but slowly. " And Robert would like him to be coached up a bit these holidays, so that he won't be so far behind the other boys, but it's so difficult to find anybody suitable. I rather fancy Isabel would like Marjorie to take him in hand, as she did before ; but I soon put that idea out of her head ; it's a very different matter now that Marjorie has two children of her own to look after."

" You'd better ask Mr. Hollins to do it," suggested Bertha, who vaguely remembered hearing Arthur remark on the previous evening : " You really ought to get some coaching to do, Hollins," and Eustace's hesitating reply : " Well, yes—it wouldn't be a bad idea."

" Who is he?" asked Mrs. West, pricking up her ears.

" He teaches at the Municipal," explained Bertha, and she invented in an inaccurate but convincing manner pedagogic qualifications for Eustace.

" But is he a gentleman, love?" inquired Mrs. West, wrinkling up her forehead dubiously.

" He's Arthur's friend," replied Bertha with a fine air of conviction. She was delighted to have such an early opportunity of assisting her new protégé and thus, in her

own mind, provoking William. "I met him last night," she added.

Her mother naturally assumed that Eustace Hollins had been at the dance.

"Do you think he's on the telephone?" she asked eagerly.

"I should hardly think so," replied Bertha. "But he lives in Derwent Terrace, I know."

The result of this conversation was an exchange of notes between Isabel West and Eustace Hollins, terminating in an interview wherein it was settled that Eustace should repair to Robert's house for an hour on two afternoons a week during the Christmas holidays to remind Bobbie of the existence of French verbs and Latin declensions. He, of course, thought that he owed this chance of earning a little extra money to Arthur, and would have been seriously annoyed if he had known of Bertha's share in the matter—he would have thought it undignified. There was some discussion as to when Eustace should give his first lesson; for the Institute's holidays did not begin until the middle of the following week, and his free times clashed with the Wests' meals.

"I think I can manage to get off early and come to you on Tuesday," said Eustace, blushing at the sordidness of his motive; he desired to give as many lessons as possible before Christmas in order to be able to purchase Christmas presents with the fees.

"Of course, I should prefer Tuesday," said Isabel West. "Naturally we want him to begin work as soon as possible. But let us leave it that you will come on Tuesday if you can, otherwise on Thursday; and don't trouble to let us know if you find Tuesday impossible, for Bobbie will be in on that afternoon in any case; he has his music lesson at four."

Eustace stammered agreement, showed her out of the front door, and returned to be severely cross-questioned

by his mother and Daisy, who had not been present at the interview, about Mrs. Robert West's clothes and conversation.

On the following Monday there was a protracted blizzard, the snow driving about the streets in blinding whirls. In the night it froze, and next morning for a few hours Hudley glittered and sparkled in its white covering; boughs of trees cracked and gave beneath the weight of snow, and telephone wires sagged in great white furry loops. Presently, however, the temperature rose, the snow melted rapidly, and the streets became lakes of thick, muddy slosh with which passing motor-lorries unpleasantly bespattered pedestrians.

Eustace hurried over his afternoon's duties at the Institute in order to get away in good time to Master Bobbie West. He was feeling extremely miserable. That morning a cherished manuscript had been returned without even the word of advice which kind-hearted editors occasionally bestowed on him. To-morrow he would feel better, and in a week he would find the courage to admit that the editor was right and the manuscript all wrong, but to-day he felt bruised in spirit and was wallowing in self-depreciation. Then, too, the change in the weather depressed him. Yesterday's snow had been beautiful and exciting, but the inevitable thaw was most unpleasant. A raw wind and a fine drizzle greeted him as he left the building; his overcoat was inadequate, and his shoes ought to have been soled a week ago. Eustace tramped miserably up Prince's Road through the snow-broth, sniffing, after the manner of his sister Lizzie, and reflecting dolefully on the long walk in front of him—Robert West had recently betaken himself to a remote suburb of Hudley which was not well served by trams. As he passed Prince's Road Terrace he remembered that he had a book of Arthur's in his pocket. It was not necessary that the book should be returned that day, but it struck him that a few words with Arthur—if he should happen

to have returned from Broaddykes'—or Marjorie would cheer him up and give him sufficient self-confidence to cope with the unknown Bobbie.

He turned up the small path of number twenty-seven and rang the bell.

After a lengthy pause the door was suddenly jerked open, and Marjorie appeared, holding Bonnie in her arms. The child's face was hidden against her mother's breast, and one small arm was round Marjorie's neck, clutching at her collar.

"Hullo! Come in!" said Marjorie, with a rather strained smile. She led the way into the front room and sat down. Eustace followed her example and explained that he was on his way to give Bobbie a lesson and had called to return Arthur's book.

During this conversation Bonnie did not move an inch, but lay quiet in her mother's arms, clinging to her neck. Eustace was very fond of Bonnie, and she was an old friend of his; he greeted the child and made various tentative remarks to her, but she neither moved nor spoke.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked in alarm.

"We've had such an awful day, Eustace," said Marjorie, with a sigh. "Emmeline has toothache, baby has cried for three solid hours, a pipe has burst and spoiled a cupboardful of groceries, and Arthur hasn't been in to dinner."

It was so obvious that her husband's absence and not the burst pipe was the cause of her depression that Eustace smiled and began to feel less desolate. He always admired the enduring strength and warmth of this couple's mutual affection; and to-day, as often before, it cheered and warmed him like a glowing flame on his own rather chilly journey through life.

"Didn't Arthur telephone?" he asked.

"Our wire has broken under the snow," replied Marjorie. "And we can't get a plumber for love or money, and we've had to let the kitchen fire out—do you under-

stand boilers and cisterns? I don't—and the entire West family is coming to tea to-night. I was going to give them an immense highly civilized meal just to show them that I don't starve Arthur—and if you saw the kitchen! The floor is covered with packets of dry soap and pounds of tea and lump sugar and tins of brass-polish and things. We've had to move them all out of the cupboard to get at the pipe. Well, well, such is life. And the last disaster is worse than all the rest put together."

"What's happened?" said Eustace, alarmed.

"Cuddly has fallen off the kitchen table and broken her head," said Marjorie seriously. With a little smile she explained: "Cuddly is Bonnie's doll."

"Oh, really!" said Eustace. He began to smile a superior, condescending, grown-up kind of smile, but it fell suddenly from his face as he realized Bonnie's despair. She had not moved except to clasp her other arm about her mother's neck; her face was determinedly hidden; and every line of her small, taut body expressed overwhelming grief. Looking at her, Eustace remembered that he had felt just as she did when that morning he had opened the envelope and found his rejected article within; he had felt just that desire to bury his too expressive face somewhere where the heartless world could not see it. Unfortunately there *had* been no sympathetic breast at hand to receive him. He surveyed Bonnie soberly.

"We wanted to take her to be mended," continued Marjorie, stroking Bonnie's hair. "But we can't leave baby."

"We can't leave baby," repeated Bonnie in a muffled tone of mournful conviction. She moved her head an inch or two, revealing a tear-stained cheek, and continued, evidently repeating a previous remark of her mother's: "And Emmeline's got *such* bad toothache that it would be unkind to ask her to go out."

Eustace gave a sympathetic murmur.

"Daddy will take her in the morning," pursued Bonnie. "But it seems *such* a long time." Her voice shook with

grief, and Marjorie put her face down to the little brown head and kissed it, and began to rock the child in her arms and murmur comforting words.

"Well, I must be off," said Eustace, much harrowed by Bonnie's distress. "I shall be late as it is. Good-bye, Bonnie."

Bonnie was too full of tears to reply, but her mother said :

"Good-bye. I'm glad you came in; you've restored my sense of humour. You can let yourself out, can't you?"

Eustace replied in the affirmative, and made his way along the little hall to the door. As he closed it behind him he realized that he desired intensely to take Bonnie's doll to town to be mended.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," he told himself fiercely. "Don't be an ass. You're going to Robert West's."

He shut the iron gate forcibly, unpleasantly aware of the damp snow upon it which seemed to filter through his gloves, and walked about a hundred yards up the road, arguing with himself all the way. To turn back and take Bonnie's doll to be mended was feeble, weak-minded, sentimental, absurd. He needed Robert West's money—partly for Christmas presents, partly to pay for the repair of the shoes which he was wearing. He needed the money *now*, at once, as soon as possible. Of course, he would receive the same amount of money altogether whether he began the course of lessons to-day or on Thursday, but he wanted as much money as possible before Christmas.

When he had covered a hundred yards he gave a short sigh of exasperation, turned round, and retraced his steps to number twenty-seven. Arguments were in vain; it was utterly and absolutely impossible for Eustace to proceed upon his way and leave Bonnie in despair about her doll. He could not do it; he would be obliged to take the idiotic article to a shop in town which specialized in such repairs and have it mended.

"Sentimental ass!" he told himself savagely as he stabbed angrily at the bell.

"Hullo!" said Marjorie, surprised. "Back again? Left something?"

Bonnie was no longer in her arms.

"I thought I might as well take that doll to be mended," said Eustace crossly.

"It's awfully good of you, Eustace," said Marjorie, colouring with pleasure. "But I thought you were going to Robert's?"

"I've come to take the doll to be mended," snapped Eustace, much annoyed.

Marjorie looked at him and smiled, then led the way into the kitchen, the condition of which was indeed deplorable. Bonnie, still much depressed, was solemnly making piles of the various groceries which lay about the floor.

"Bonnie," said her mother, "Uncle Eustace says he'll take Cuddly to be mended to-night. Where is she?"

Bonnie was so intensely delighted at this news that she felt ashamed to display her emotion, and, averting her eyes, she replied coldly: "She's on the dresser." When, however, it became a question of disrobing Cuddly and making her into a brown paper parcel, Bonnie's maternal feelings prevailed, and she assisted at the process, and finally accompanied Eustace to the front door and watched him go down the path, reluctant to lose sight of his precious burden.

Eustace mounted a tram and was borne away to Hudley. As he balanced his body in the crowded car, clutching the doll in his left hand and drawing out coppers with his right, he thought to himself:

"I've known for some time that you're a fool, Eustace Hollins, but I didn't think you were quite such a fool as this."

He dismounted and splashed along a street to the toy-shop.

The shop was brightly lighted and hot and full of parents making an early selection of Christmas toys. Eustace threaded his way between them, and, unwrapping the parcel, displayed Cuddly's naked body to the sympathetic owner of the shop, who led him round a corner to a recess where stood a shelf covered with dolls' heads in assorted sizes. The sight of all these detached female busts amused Eustace.

"I wonder why they don't have masculine dolls?" he mused.

"Can't say, sir," put in the man. "We have a few, but they're never as popular as the others."

Eustace at once fell into a conversation with this man, and acquired a great deal of useless but interesting information about dolls, their heads, eyes, hair, limbs, clothes, price, and history. The shop-owner, pleased to have an auditor, produced various specially elegant heads suitable for application to Cuddly. Eustace carefully considered the psychology of Bonnie. Would she prefer Cuddly's new head to resemble or to differ from the previous one? He came to the conclusion that she would like her doll best unchanged, and took some trouble to extract from the débris of china Cuddly's painted eyes, in order to ascertain their colour.

"I suppose you couldn't possibly have it ready to-night?" inquired Eustace.

"Well, I hardly think the glue would be set," hesitated the man. "But I'll see what we can do. Come in just before we close."

Eustace agreed and left, glancing at his watch. The hour was too far advanced to permit of his going to Robert West's.

It was as he turned into Derwent Terrace that he realized what a fearful half-hour with his mother lay in front of him. Could he possibly admit that he had deferred Robert West's seven and sixpence in order to take a doll to be mended—for which, by the way, he would have to pay? He decided that he could not. It was,

indeed, as impossible for him to admit the action to his mother as to refrain from performing it.

He entered the house and found his family just sitting down to tea in the dining-room. On either side of the long table, which was set with a very plain high tea, sat his sisters Lizzie and Daisy. Daisy, the youngest of the Hollins family, was twenty-two years old, and pretty in a dollyish pink-and-white way. Had she known Bertha West, that young lady would have been her beau idéal of dress and conduct. Daisy had aspirations towards expensive clothes and a rich husband which were not likely to be fulfilled considering her mother's small income and Eustace's incapacity. She knew this and bitterly despised her brother for earning so little money. Eustace, who was fond of her and sorry for her, gave her little presents whenever he could afford to do so, and often took her out for small treats which she did not appreciate. Lizzie would have enjoyed these outings immensely, but Eustace was under the impression that she did not care for going out and really preferred to stay at home with Mrs. Hollins, so he rarely asked her to accompany him.

The unbeautiful Mrs. Hollins, in the dowdy high-necked black dresses she affected—she despised modern fashions, but was annoyed because she could not afford to dress fashionably—her coarse black hair straggling down the back of her neck, presided firmly over the tea-table. She always contrived to combine an expression of injury with an air of determined aggression; her proud claim was that she “said what she thought.” If this had been true her thoughts must have been very disagreeable ones, but in reality she very rarely “thought,” though she was shrewd and cunning enough in the defence of her own interests. Eustace feared her.

“Hullo, Mother!” he said in a nervously cheerful tone.

“Eustace!” said she with a suspicious air, looking sharply at him over her steel spectacles. “What are you doing home so early? Haven’t you been to Robert West’s?”

"No," said Eustace, sinking into a chair and preparing for the worst.

"Why not?" snapped his mother.

"I couldn't get away in time," said Eustace, turning scarlet with shame at this abominable evasion of the truth.

Mrs. Hollins glanced at him sharply, but she did not suspect him of lying to her; she did not consider that he had enough "gumption" to do such a thing. She began, however, on a shrill note of anger:

"That's so like you, Eustace! You can always be trusted to neglect your own advantage. Anybody else would simply have left the Institute and gone to Robert West's without thinking twice about it. But you must always stay and finish up your own work and other people's as well."

"Really, mother," protested Eustace feebly, conscious of a bad case.

"Other people *always* consult their own convenience," pursued Mrs. Hollins angrily. "But you *never* do. No! Never! Let me tell you, Eustace, that you're not rich enough to be so ridiculously particular."

She continued in this strain for some minutes, then suddenly remembered that Eustace was tealess, removed the cosy abruptly, poured him out a cup of tea and passed it to him, suppressed irritation in her every gesture.

"Tea's very early, isn't it?" said Eustace presently in an attempt to be pleasantly conversational.

"We're going out to-night," said the fair-haired Daisy tartly.

"It's very bad walking," observed Eustace, consciously using a Yorkshire turn of speech in order to mollify his mother, whose brow was still like a thundercloud. He perceived that he was "let in" for an evening alone with her. The Hollinses kept no maid, and he could not very well leave her alone in the house all evening. He had hoped to remain at Arthur's after taking the doll, and was disappointed at not being able to do so. Moreover, he

foresaw difficulties in the way of going out at all to fetch the doll. Besides, he detested evenings alone with his mother; it was impossible for him to do work of any kind when alone in the room with her, for her personality was so strong that it filled the room and came between his mind and the books in front of him. He repressed a sigh. "Shall I fetch you home?" he inquired of Daisy.

"You needn't trouble," said Daisy, who seemed to be in a bad mood to-night.

"Of course Eustace will fetch us," said Mrs. Hollins shortly. "Unless, of course"—bitingly—"he can't get away in time."

"Are you going too?" said Eustace, overlooking his mother's sarcasm in his enormous relief.

"It's true I don't go out often," said Mrs. Hollins with her most injured air. "But still I don't think it need surprise you so very much, Eustace. I hope you'll remember to keep the fire in."

"I shall be out," announced Eustace firmly. "I'm going round to Arthur West's."

This, when his mother's dislike to leaving the house unprotected was profound and well known, was rank rebellion on Eustace's part. Mrs. Hollins, however, said nothing more; she could do what she liked with Eustace on most points, but she had discovered on other occasions that on the subjects of books, his writing, and the Arthur Wests she could do nothing with him at all. His obstinacy on these points astounded her, and she frequently tried her wiles upon him to see if it was diminishing, but she was becoming resigned to her lack of success.

After tea Daisy created a slight storm by declining to wash-up, because, as she said, it would make her hands red; there were a few unpleasant moments, and then Daisy retired upstairs in tears, and Lizzie went into the kitchen to wash-up. Eustace followed her there and helped her, and while drying spoons he told her of the rejection of his latest literary production, and felt soothed

by her sympathy. (The incident of the doll he would never reveal to anybody—he was too much ashamed of it.) In certain moods Eustace loathed washing-up with all his soul, but in others it soothed his restless brain; tangible cups and saucers were easier to handle than the ideas which floated darkly through his mind, and inanimate objects had a calm which seemed delightful after his wrestlings at the Institute with turbulent classes of forty odd small boys.

Mrs. Hollins privately admired Daisy intensely, and was fiercely sorry for her narrow lot; she now limped upstairs—she was a martyr to gout—and helped her to dress, subtly flattering her and restoring her to good humour. Daisy became bright and merry, and assisted her mother to don her best black silk; Lizzie made her toilet in a few hurried minutes; Eustace, admonished by his mother and infuriated by her admonitions, brushed his hair; the house was barred, locked and bolted; and the four set out together. As the destination of Mrs. Hollins and her daughters lay nearer Hudley than Derwent Terrace, Eustace had to experience the ignominy of putting them into a tram and waiting himself for the next precisely similar one. He cursed his own lack of courage as he stood, beaten upon by the wind and rain, in the now rapidly clearing streets.

Eustace secured the renovated Cuddly, was warned that she should not be subjected to heat for twelve hours or so, and took a tram up to Prince's Road Terrace. Emmeline, with her face tied up in a handkerchief, admitted him and thrust him into the front room, which seemed full of people. Blinking in the light after the comparative darkness of the streets, Eustace suddenly remembered Marjorie's words about the advent of the West family to partake of tea. He perceived Bertha in a corner. He blushed violently, stammered, and began to back out of the room in spite of Arthur's detaining hand. Marjorie swooped down upon him.

"Is that Cuddly?" she cried, snatching at the parcel.

She unrolled it and revealed Cuddly's kid-covered form. "It is! How awfully good of you, Eustace! You've saved the situation; Bonnie can't go to sleep without this far-famed doll." She turned to the assembly and explained rapidly the tragedy of Cuddly's fall. Seizing Eustace by the arm, she said: "Come upstairs and give it to her yourself."

Eustace, intensely embarrassed, followed her out of the room. Behind him Arthur's voice boomed: "Awfully good of you, Hollins."

"Sentimental fool!" Eustace adjured himself, stumbling up the stairs.

Marjorie entered a small room and turned on the light. In a neat little wooden bed lay Bonnie in her woollen nightgown, her face sad, her blue eyes wide and sleepless.

"Bonnie," said her mother from the end of the bed, "Uncle Eustace has brought you Cuddly."

Bonnie shot up into a sitting position, extended her arms for the doll and clasped her to her bosom in silent ecstasy. Eustace was completely repaid for his trouble by the expression on her face; he recovered his good temper, and noticed with pleasure that Bonnie was caressing the doll's towy hair with precisely the same action which Marjorie had that afternoon employed in stroking Bonnie's. He smiled down at her.

"She's hardly changed at all with being in hospital," observed Bonnie with deep satisfaction.

"Scarcely at all," agreed Marjorie cheerfully, at once adopting the hospital theory. "Her hair is perhaps a trifle shorter, that's all."

"Lots of people have their hair cut off when they're in hospital," said Bonnie. "Uncle Marcus told me so. I dare say Cuddly has had hers cut off, and it's grown again."

"Very likely," agreed Marjorie. "Now thank Uncle Eustace, darling, and then go to sleep."

But the interview lasted a good while longer, for Bonnie demanded that Cuddly should be reclothed, and when,

this done, she was informed that it was not consistent with Cuddly's health to sleep in Bonnie's arms—for fear that the glue might melt—she insisted on sleeping accommodation being provided for the doll on a near-by chair. At length, however, these matters were arranged, and Bonnie cast her arms about Eustace and kissed him, and then lay down and resigned herself to sleep.

In the hall Eustace made a movement towards his hat and coat, but was frustrated in his intention of departing by Arthur, who took him firmly by the arm and led him into the room and introduced him.

"My mother—my father—my sister Gladys," he said. "I think you've met Bertha before, haven't you?"

Eustace blushed and stammered; Bertha smiled, revealing her dimple. The party reseated themselves round the fire.

"It was *nice* of you to bother so about Bonnie's doll," said Gladys emphatically to Eustace, her kind eyes wet behind her spectacles.

Mrs. West beamed on Eustace, Mr. West looked amused but kindly, Bertha gazed admiringly at him; he was the hero of the hour. Marjorie continued her interrupted history of the day's disasters, to the sympathetic exclamations of Gladys and Mrs. West. That part of Eustace's mind which was always faithfully recording impressions for future use noted that Marjorie's hair hung in loose, untidy but lustrous strands over her face, and that one side of her blouse flopped out of her skirt; her face, too, looked white and tired, but her conversation sparkled as much as ever. In Arthur's eyes might be read a defiant expression, which seemed to say that he was perfectly well aware of and did not at all object to his wife's untidiness of hair and dress; on the contrary, he positively preferred her that way. Indeed, on glancing from Marjorie to Bertha, Eustace received the same impression as in transferring his gaze from Bonnie to Bonnie's doll. The one glowing and vital, the other artificial and lifeless, elegantly correct, neither giving nor

receiving nor being worn out by any human sympathy or human struggle. Had he really once thought Bertha pretty? Surely not! The girl was not looking her best to-night, and Eustace, knowing nothing of her recent indisposition, thought scornfully :

“ She doesn’t even do her own futile job well.”

He glowered at Bertha, who was sitting beside him and pouring into his ear “ sweet ” anecdotes of herself at the age of four and her many dolls.

“ This sentimentality will make me sick,” thought Eustace, already a trifle nauseated by the sentimental incident of Bonnie’s doll. He looked Bertha coldly in the face and said “ Really,” his descending intonation putting an emphatic full-stop at the end of the word.

Bertha, checked thus abruptly in the full tide of her reminiscences, had a spasm of self-pity and annoyance.

“ Doesn’t even *this* man admire me?” she thought irritably.

She put her head back against the cushion of her chair, smiled wistfully, and observed in a low tone :

“ I’ve been so ill since I last saw you.”

“ Really?” murmured Eustace a trifle more sympathetically.

“ A kind of influenza,” continued Bertha, her dark eyes imploring sympathy. “ I often have it—I seem to get colds *so* easily somehow.”

Eustace, cooing sympathy, looked at the thin fabric of her sleeve, through which he could see her slender round arm, and thought that probably her colds were due to insufficient clothing. Her arm, however, pleased him ; it did not taper from elbow to wrist, but preserved the same slender roundness along its whole length. (William Irwell considered Bertha’s arms rather poor—too thin and stick-like.) Eustace’s glance wandered to the girl’s face, and he was struck afresh by the beauty of the faint, delicate freckles sprinkled beneath her dark eyes.

“ She really is quite pretty, after all,” he decided.

There was a pause. The rest of the party were listening

to Marjorie's excited account of how alarmingly the water had squirted from the burst pipe.

"Any other Hudleian in my present situation," communed Eustace with himself, "would make love to Bertha West now—not properly, you know, but just enough to give a fillip to the evening. I should like to do it myself, but I don't know how. What an admission for a man of twenty-five who pretends to write fiction. I wonder how you begin. Something a trifle more intimate—she *is* pretty. Quite accustomed to carrying on flirtations, I should think. It would be a change from the everlasting grind of teaching, and writing idiotic things that are no use to anybody, and being nagged at by mother and Daisy."

He turned to Bertha and said suddenly with a smile :

"Do you think you wrap yourself up warmly enough? Hudley's so bleak, you know." ("Brilliant!" jeered his inner self. "What an ass you are!")

"Oh, Mr. Hollins!" exclaimed Bertha, prettily fluttered, her cheeks pink, her eyes round and admiring "That's what mother is *always* saying to me! But woollen things are so *hideous*, don't you think so?"

"Of course, other kinds of things are much prettier," observed Eustace fatuously, feeling bold and clever.

Bertha giggled and smiled her admiration. (Her private scornful thought was: "How silly he is! I could do anything with him.") She sat up, and with an experienced hand led Eustace along the highways of a one-evening's flirtation. Eustace felt extremely pleased with himself and revelled in this—for him—rare sensation; he laughed a great deal—his mother had once told him that his laugh was quite melodious, and by subsequent examination he had convinced himself that she was right—and related anecdotes with gusto. He loved to relate anecdotes, gazing avidly at his hearers for approbation. If they gave it, none so happy as Eustace, but if the applause was insincere, he sulked like a spoilt child and felt neglected and misunderstood. He knew, of course,

that Bertha's admiration was not genuine, but it was pleasant to pretend to himself that it was.

At this juncture Mr. West cut across the conversation with a solemn statistical remark about the populations of Liverpool and various other ports. Eustace felt bound to air his knowledge of Marseilles. The conversation fell into masculine lines. Marjorie could and did talk upon every subject under the sun, but Mrs. West and her two daughters sat silent and disregarded. Bertha was annoyed at this interruption of her conquest of Eustace, and population statistics bored her. She caught her mother's eye and glanced meaningly at the clock. Obediently Mrs. West took the cue.

"I think it's time we were going, William," she said firmly. "I'm sure Marjorie ought to be in bed; she looks fit to drop. Bertha, too—I don't want her to get over-tired."

"Isn't Jenkinson coming for you?" inquired Marjorie.

"The car's broken down," said Mrs. West mournfully. "Really I think we'd better go."

Eustace, with a start, suddenly remembered that he had promised to fetch his mother and sisters from their hostess's house. He jumped up in a panic and announced that he, too, must go, and that at once. Common courtesy, however, kept him fidgeting impatiently about in the hall while the three West ladies put on their outer wraps and took a last peep at the sleeping children, and the party left the house together. He looked about anxiously for a tram, but there was not one in sight, so he walked down Prince's Road with Mr. West and Bertha, while Mrs. West followed more slowly, leaning on Gladys's arm. The streets were now clear, and the night was fine.

At the corner of the Lane, as it was called, a tram made its appearance, and Eustace mounted it and was borne away while the Wests, now in one group, turned up the Lane towards Beech Lea.

"Was his name Hollins? I didn't quite catch it," said Mr. West to his family in general

"Yes—Eustace Hollins," replied Bertha. "He's going to coach Bobbie, you know."

"I gathered that from Arthur's remarks," said Mr. West. "Good natured young fellow; very nice of him about Bonnie's doll—very few young men nowadays would have done it—but a trifle unbalanced, perhaps."

"All these clever people are the same," panted Mrs. West—the rough surface of the Lane made her breathless. "They seem to have no sense of proportion. Marjorie is just the same; she's just such another as Mr. Hollins. Unpractical, you know."

"Still, he seems a nice gentlemanly young fellow," contended Mr. West, who had been favourably impressed by Eustace's accent and his sojourn in Marseilles. "Quite a nice friend for Arthur, though, of course, younger. You've met him before, Bertha?"

"Yes," said Bertha. She deliberately put into this monosyllable a wealth of meaning which made her mother think uncomfortably: "I do hope there isn't going to be any nonsense between Bertha and that Hollins boy. Better keep her away from Arthur's for a while. Still, I don't know—he's a professional man—Bertha's twenty-six. But I don't suppose for a moment there's anything in it. Sure not to be anything in it."

The good-natured Gladys thought: "If Bertha wants to marry that nice boy, she shall have him, whatever mother and father say." She compressed her lips and tried to feel firm and helpful.

There was a rather long pause, which Mr. West broke by a dry remark on the scarcity of plumbers.

Bertha chuckled to herself at the success of her meaning tone.

"They think I'm in love with him," she meditated. "If they only knew! Mother will mention it to Isabel, and in time it will get round to William Irwell and stir him up. How silly I was to rush away from the dance like that! I don't believe William means to have any-

thing to do with Violet. I wonder how soon I shall see him again."

2.

Meanwhile Eustace dutifully escorted his mother and sisters home to Derwent Terrace. He was very bright and talkative, eliciting some sparks of amusement even from Mrs. Hollins, who was otherwise annoyed with him for being so late in calling for her. Contrary to his custom, he volunteered a detailed account of his evening's entertainment, slightly exaggerating in the relation his own *bon mots* and Bertha's appreciation of them. He partook of cocoa—a beverage he loathed—cheerfully, kissed his mother with affection, and repaired to bed highly pleased with himself.

In the chilling solitude of his room, however, he began suddenly to wonder whether, after all, he had not made a fool of himself at Arthur West's. Had his wit really scintillated? Had he been a social success or a talkative bounder? Dubiously he considered the matter. At length his face brightened, and he told himself stoutly :

"At any rate, I'm sure *she* liked me."

He whistled the toreador's song from "Carmen" and felt very gay and worldly.

CHAPTER V

FLUCTUATIONS OF WILLIAM

1.

IN the course of the next week Sir Melfield's youngest daughter, Agatha, returned from school at Charford, Eustace began to coach the gloomy and taciturn Bobbie—who inexplicably took a fancy to his tutor and behaved with comparative docility during his lessons—Mrs. West forgot her suspicions of Eustace and Bertha in the excitement of receiving the Christmas mail from Beyrout, and William Irwell's difficulties were temporarily postponed, as Violet informed her father that she was about to spend a few weeks with some friends who on investigation proved to be perfectly respectable and correct. William also perceived that his former panic about Violet had been quite unnecessary and foolish; nobody, least of all his father-in-law, expected him to commit any such chivalrous idiocy as that involved in remarrying his divorced wife. Such things were done in magazine stories, but not in matter-of-fact Hudley, and he determined to settle any trouble of that kind by marrying Bertha West with the least possible delay. He forgave Bertha for her apparent lack of sympathy at the dance; of course, the poor girl had not known what to say in reply to his abrupt confidences. How should she? After Christmas he would get hold of Robert West quietly some time and give him a hint about himself and Bertha. Meanwhile William was very busy at the works and with the affairs of his brother Ernest. Happening to hear casually from Isabel West that her husband's family would all be present at a concert to be held in the Town Hall on the Thursday before Christmas, he took the trouble to get himself included in the party which Sir

Melfield was taking to the affair, and decided that he would go and talk to Bertha during the interval—a marked attention on his part which would be observed and commented on by every family of importance in Hudley.

The concert was to be given by the Hudley Choral Society, which had rendered Handel's "Messiah" on the Thursday before Christmas for the last fifty years. The hall was always packed from floor to ceiling, and nobody who was anybody in Hudleian society omitted to book seats in the dress circle.

The Wests' car—once more in running order—formed one of a long string of carriages and motors in front of the Town Hall. Bertha felt a trifle bad tempered; she had had an altercation with her mother about the amount of clothes she should wear, and her own common sense had obliged her to yield the contested point and don an extra undergarment. As she descended from the car, however, the lights, the scudding clouds, the crowd of watching people, and the possibility of seeing William Irwell, excited her and restored her to good temper. The Wests swept up the wide staircase and entered the brilliantly lighted horseshoe circle, which glittered with expensive frocks, diamonds, and white shirt-fronts. Gladys was making her way along the row of velvet-covered seats when she suddenly stopped abruptly and whispered: "I'll sit next to mother, Bee," and clambered round the ruffled Bertha, looking hot and mysterious. Bertha shrugged her shoulders in annoyance at this sudden change of plan, which abandoned her left ear to the conversation of strangers and put her one seat further from the aisle along which William Irwell would presumably walk; but she said nothing, realizing that the gleam in her sister's usually mild eyes meant determination. She sank with careful grace into her seat and began to arrange her expensive wraps.

"Good-evening, Miss West," said a voice at her side.

She turned, and perceived Eustace Hollins sitting next

to her, attired in correct evening dress. This juxtaposition, contrived by the sentimental Gladys, displeased Bertha. Eustace was less than the dust to her that night, for she had heard flattering rumours—through the agency of Isabel—that William Irwell, who took no interest whatever in music, had determined to be present. In the excitement of considering what this might portend, her last week's flirtation with Eustace had passed completely out of Bertha's mind, and she did not wish to be reminded of it.

"Tiresome creature!" she thought irritably. She gave Eustace a cold smile and said indifferently: "I didn't know you subscribed to these concerts. I don't think I've seen you here before."

Eustace was so happy that he felt obliged to tell his good news to someone. "I don't usually come," he explained eagerly. "The fact is, you see, this is the first important engagement the contralto has had, and she comes from a small place in Wales—mayor's daughter or something—and I know a man there, and he suggested that I should do a special article on this concert for the local newspaper. Rather nice for me, isn't it? I only heard about it this morning—letter from the newspaper people. I had quite a job to get a seat." With childish glee he described his efforts to obtain a seat, and gazed triumphantly around, feeling that his foot was upon the first rung of the ladder of literary fame. (He had often felt this before, but was as far off from the elusive second rung as ever.)

Most of his narrative was Greek to Bertha, who, however, vaguely understood that Eustace was supposed to know something about music. His eager face seemed to demand some response, so she said at random, her eyes meanwhile on the main entrance to the circle:

"Do you know a great deal about music?"

"No, scarcely anything," replied Eustace cheerfully. By this he meant that music was not his speciality—his remark was not otherwise strictly true, for he loved music

and, in an unprofessional way, knew a good deal "about" it.

Bertha gave him a dismissing smile, turned her shoulder to him, and, leaning across Gladys to her mother, implored her to urge Mr. West to buy a programme.

"I'll get you one," volunteered Eustace, jumping up. (Any trifling amelioration in his fortunes sent him into the seventh heaven of delight, and made him feel energetic and capable.) "Meanwhile use mine."

"Why, it's Mr. Hollins!" cried Gladys in well-simulated surprise. She beamed upon him affectionately, and, when he returned with programmes, soon extracted from him the reason for his presence at the concert, and called her mother's attention to him, and, in general, fussed over him in kindly good-natured fashion. All this was intended to assist Bertha's supposed love-affair with Eustace. Bertha fumed, gazed at the entrance until her neck ached, and then by a well-managed absent-mindedness reduced Eustace to silence.

To Bertha this concert was a social function of the first importance; she loved the lights and the hum of conversation and the elaborate toilets of the ladies, and it was a real pleasure to her to exchange affable smiles of recognition with all the elegant celebrities. Eustace Hollins, on the other hand, enjoyed the affair because it was the quintessence of Hudley; he was amused by the silk-clad ladies who swished so condescendingly down the aisle, and still more so by the red-faced men with drooping moustaches who followed them and who were worth anything from one hundred to two hundred and fifty thousand pounds each. He noted with keen pleasure the jovial and festive spirit of the occasion; he liked the men who leaned over several intervening seats and bellowed, "Well, how are you, Fred?" into the dull ears of white-haired octogenarians, who had come to the "Messiah" every Christmas for forty odd years, and intended to do so until death claimed them. Far away in front lay the platform, fringed by a lavish row of palms and aspidistras. Behind the

plants were many music stands and chairs, and behind again rose tiers of benches in an imposing array. Suddenly, men in evening dress and girls in white frocks began to pour into these seats; members of the orchestra also threaded their way cautiously through the forest of music stands and seated themselves. A loud tuning of instruments resounded through the hall. Eustace lay back in his chair and observed the scene with a humorously tender smile. Hudley was his native town, and he loved it, and here was Hudley at its best; but how delightfully funny it all was! He yearned to describe it; half-consciously his mind formed phrases.

"The Huntleys are very late," said Bertha peevishly.

Almost immediately the swing-doors behind her opened, and the Huntley party swept down the broad shallow steps to the front row—Sir Melfield was the president of the Choral Society, and, as such, naturally commanded the best seats in the hall. Bertha watched the party with a beating heart—Sir Melfield, a tall and imposing figure with his thick white hair and hawk-like features; his sister, small and almost overwhelmed in the sweep of her purple velvet gown; Bertha's brother, Robert, tall and extremely thin, with a dark and rather smug face; his wife, Isabel, fair and elegant, in a scandalously low evening dress; William Irwell, looking small but human and cheerful beside the gloomy elongated Robert; and, lastly, an unexpected fair girl, very young and timid-looking, in an unfashionable white frock as much too high as Isabel's was too low.

"I suppose that's Agatha Huntley," said Bertha to Gladys. "She's grown a good deal since I last saw her. What an awful dress!"

"She looks a sweet little thing, I think," observed Gladys mildly.

The party gathered at the foot of the aisle, sorted themselves into suitable order, and took their seats. Agatha Huntley sat between William Irwell and her father. She turned her face to William and spoke to him; he handed

her a programme and produced opera-glasses from his coat pocket. Bertha was immediately tortured with jealousy.

The conductor came on to the platform, and the audience settled into its seats with a final rustle. The four principal singers swept on to the front of the platform amid much applause, the men handing the two ladies to their cane chairs with much gallantry. Score books were opened; the conductor tapped his desk impatiently and glared over his shoulder at the still whispering audience. Presently there was silence, and the familiar overture broke upon the air. Then the tenor rose and sang an aria in a tenderly sympathetic voice. In the middle of this the massed chorus at the back rose quietly, and suddenly burst forth into a volume of song.

The concert proceeded, but Bertha heeded it not. It was gall and wormwood to her to see William sitting beside an unmarried and unattached young girl—so young, so very young, only just eighteen years old. Bertha turned upon Agatha Huntley the envenomed eyes of a jealous woman beholding her rival; scornfully she noted her frightened ineffective eyes, her pale eyebrows, the drooping despondent lines of her immature figure, her thin arms encased in long white gloves, round one of which a childish gold curb bracelet—much too tight for its owner's present wrist—described an insipid curve. Vapid little fool! Stuffed to the brim with schoolgirl notions of propriety, no doubt! Religious, strict, dutiful, gauche, with red chilblained hands and an air of shocked disapproval. Narrow, like her figure. Her thick fair hair was scraped back above her ears—no doubt she thought back-combing wicked. Her crowning idiocy was a gold chain and locket—a locket! In this present year of grace, a locket!—which hung demurely round her fair white neck. In vain Bertha assured herself that she had nothing to fear from such a rival, and that William was probably suffering acute ennui by her side; she seethed with jealousy, and in her occasional more reasonable moments felt that the long-

drawn-out delay of William Irwell's approach to her was becoming too much for her nerves.

The performers filed off the platform for the interval. A smell of coffee floated on the air; the chorus and orchestra were partaking of light refreshments behind the scenes. All over the circle men were rising and pushing their way out into the aisles. Bertha's eyes, fixed on the Huntley party, observed with a last spasm of jealousy that William addressed some gallant remark to Agatha before he left her.

"Now he's coming to me," thought Bertha, and she coloured with pleasure.

"Have you noticed the man in charge of the kettle-drums?" inquired Eustace melodiously in her ear. "He's so frightfully fond of them—probably he gives them names and they're his soul's companions. I simply love to watch him stopping their throb with a gentle hand and unscrewing all their little taps . . . and then he suddenly tightens them all up again and poises his sticks ready for a thundering descent . . ."

(Some of Eustace's mental phrases about the drummer had become too insistent to be suppressed in silence, and he felt obliged to try their effect on somebody.)

Bertha was looking at William Irwell, who was at that moment ascending the shallow steps.

Eustace Hollins's presence at the concert was very unfortunate for Bertha. William Irwell's shrewd glance had remarked him at the beginning of the affair; and now as he strolled up the steps with a casual mien he saw him again—a young, not bad-looking fellow, unknown and therefore suspect to William, with a gentlemanly air, engaged in apparently intimate conversation with Bertha. William mounted another step. The fellow could not be more than twenty-five or so—ten years younger than William. In days gone by in such a situation William would have bethought himself of his half-million and his well-groomed hair, decided that he was as good as anybody in the matter of masculine attractions, advanced boldly to

the fray, and routed Eustace Hollins by the mere force of self-confidence. But since his wife had found his attractions so negative that she could not bring herself to remain with him, William had been liable to sudden, short-lived, but acute, pangs of self-depreciation. He could not now bear to risk a rebuff; as Violet had preferred another man, it was probable that Bertha West would do the same, especially when the other man was ten years younger than William.

Bertha's eyes, large, bright, appealing, caught his own; he gave her a curt nod and a restrained smile and passed on into the corridor. Bertha turned abruptly to Eustace and said to him with a charming seriousness:

"How *awfully* well you describe things, Mr. Hollins."

"Do you think so?" said the flattered Eustace. He had half risen to make his retreat into the corridor, but at this remark he tentatively sat down again. "I've been doing a series of descriptive articles," he began hesitatingly, "about the Yorkshire abbeys." He blushed scarlet at this unwonted self-revelation.

"Really?" said Bertha, opening her dark eyes wide and looking into his face with simulated enthusiasm. She cast about fiercely in her mind for some "clever" observation, and remembered a remark of Marjorie's. "Were they illustrated?" she asked, bestowing a side smile on Miss Huntley and Isabel, who were looking up at her, and then turning with flattering haste back to Eustace.

All Eustace's literary aspirations were at once poured forth into her uncomprehending ear.

Eustace was an exceedingly lonely young man, and sympathy was rare and precious to him. Mrs. Hollins and Daisy had no sympathy to give him, and the devotion of Lizzie was inarticulate. Arthur West was his only friend, and Arthur had not much time to spare for him. Moreover, Arthur was strong-minded and had definite views and acted on them, and he quite rightly considered that Eustace ought to make an effort to shape his destiny for himself instead of leaving it in the hands of chance

and his mother. Marjorie West was fond of Eustace, but she had a husband, a house, and two small children to look after, not to mention a host of social welfare activities, and she, too, had not much time for Eustace. It was not, therefore, surprising that this intimate *tête-à-tête* with the pretty Bertha seemed to him a unique and delightful experience. The loud chatter of the circle surged unheeded round his head; Bertha's pale, delicate face drooped attentively towards him, her glossy, scented hair was very near his shoulder.

The interval was half over when, with a sudden start, Eustace felt sure that he was making a fool of himself. Blushing hotly, he stammered an incoherent excuse to Bertha and fled into the corridor to cool his emotions with a cigarette and a few formal words to Robert West about the progress of Bobbie.

"He seems such a nice boy," observed the mild Gladys to her sister, beaming behind her spectacles.

Mrs. West had previously conveyed herself into the front row to talk to Miss Huntley.

Bertha, sick at heart because of William's defection, smiled archly at her sister's remark. She was glad that Eustace's presence had enabled her to maintain successfully the proper female attitude of caring nothing for any particular man until his preference is clearly shown.

The interval was over, the refreshed performers streamed back on to the platform, Mrs. West regained her own seat, and the returning men squashed past enraged but silent women, creasing their frocks and sweeping small articles from their laps to the ground in the process. William Irwell resumed his seat beside Agatha, making a jocular remark to which she replied with a nervous murmur. He considered Agatha and thought that she was the exact opposite of her two elder sisters. (This difference had, indeed, been Sir Melfield's object in sending her to Charford.) Seldom had William seen a girl less deserving of a man's attention. Bertha from her position some rows farther back watched William's every move-

ment and wondered what his considering glance at Agatha might mean. The music began again. Presently the entire audience collected their programmes, handkerchiefs, opera-glasses, scarves, and other small articles, and rose to their feet to show respect to the Hallelujah Chorus, or rather to a whim of one of the four Georges—they were not quite sure which George, but he was a king of England and therefore presumably respectable. Agatha was unused to "Messiah" concerts, did not understand why she had to rise, and became slightly entangled with the white coat which lay over the back of her seat. William Irwell, bored but always gallant towards the fair sex, put a hand on the serge coat—in his opinion as well as in Bertha's a fearfully dowdy garment—and disembarrassed the girl of it. The Hallelujah Chorus broke in billows of sound upon the air. Bertha's heart swelled with pain. Oh, to be safely married to William and have done with this horrible suspicion and jealousy! She smiled faintly—just enough to show her dimple—at Eustace Hollins, and hated him because he was not William Irwell.

The concert over, the audience streamed out into the corridors and crushed down the staircase. Long lines of cabs and cars waited impatiently in the dark street or hooted as they backed and turned. The Wests stood in the porch of the hall and shivered, and all three women wished that Arthur were unmarried and there, with them, finding their car with his customary ease and coolness.

"Can I give you a lift, Mr. Hollins?" asked Mr. West, happening to encounter Eustace in the prevailing crush, and in the all-pervading atmosphere of Christmas recalling with sentimental pleasure the episode of Bonnie's doll.

"Thanks awfully, sir," replied Eustace eagerly. "Can I find your car for you?"

Mr. West was pleased by Eustace's "sir," and gladly assented. Eustace ran hither and thither, hot and anxious, but of course he was not successful in finding Jenkinson. Robert West found the chauffeur and helped his mother and sisters into the car, and the Wests were just beginning

to feel a trifle impatient at Eustace's delay when he appeared, breathless and ashamed of his incompetency. He was constitutionally incapable of finding motors, porters, luggage, or people whom he was sent to meet. He realised his disability, but always hoped that this time he had overcome it; and each fresh failure smote him again to earth with a miserable sense of his own futility.

Bertha sat hunched in one corner of the car, listening scornfully to Eustace's melodious babblings about the soprano's purity of tone. When he left the car, however, she gave him a nod and a smile sufficiently cordial to keep him interested in her in case William Irwell proved faithless.

"Nobody shall ever know I want William to marry me," thought Bertha with fierce pride, blinking her eyes to keep back the tears. "Nobody shall ever know until he actually asks me."

Subconsciously but definitely she allotted to Eustace the rôle of playing screen to her feelings and salve to her pride; that he might possibly receive an injury in its performance did not occur to her.

Eustace for his part found his critique for the newspaper difficult to write; obscure promptings and thoughts of Bertha's prettiness shot across his mind and marred his efforts towards concentration. He began to wonder whether he were not letting brilliant-hued life drift past him while he sat in his attic shunning delights and reading dull books, and writing things which were rarely accepted. He longed for real Life and the delights of the world, the flesh, and the devil. This mood of craving for luxury and enjoyment was not rare with him. He knew its dangerous wiles of old, and felt depressed at the thought of having to fight once more this same monotonous battle.

"Good Lord! Have I to start *that* all over again?" he demanded disgustedly of the Fates as he dropped his contribution into the letter-box.

As he turned away homewards visions of luxury—vivid

colours, soft music, beautiful women—rose imperatively before him, urging him to be less strait-laced, to modify his impossibly high ideals, to enjoy himself while he was young. With a sigh he began to fight these visions with lines from “The Grammarian’s Funeral.” In sober hours he was rather amused by his own partiality for this poem, but in moments of stress he found it extremely useful—not that he considered himself an ardent pursuer of learning, nor that he believed in the existence of a God who would make

“ . . . the heavenly period
Perfect the earthen,”

but somehow its words always helped him to make headway in his struggles against the warm corrupting flood of hedonism.

“I wish I’d never met Bertha West,” he said with a sigh of exasperation as he turned into Derwent Terrace.

2.

It was the custom of Bertha’s cousins the Denbridge Wests to give a large family party on Christmas Eve, being in their turn entertained at Beech Lea on Christmas Day. Bertha and Gladys were usually invited to have lunch with their cousins on Christmas Eve so that they might help with the preparations for the evening, Mr. and Mrs. West driving over later in the day. This year as usual the two girls were supposed to be lunching at Lower Denbridge Hall, but Gladys firmly declined to go. The ancient Beech Lea cook had most unseasonably fallen ill, and all the multitudinous arrangements for the Christmas Day dinner fell upon Gladys’s shoulders. Mince-tarts had to be made and turkeys stuffed by somebody, and Gladys with her usual good nature decided to undertake the duty. Bertha could go to Denbridge by herself. Mrs. West acquiesced in this arrangement rather reluctantly, for Bertha had a lighter hand for pastry than the substantial Gladys. But Bertha could not be relied upon as

Gladys could ; she was apt to be irresponsible and feather-headed and to have social engagements to fulfil at the wrong moment.

"I think it would be best for you to go after all, Bertha," announced Mrs. West at the conclusion of a long monologue on the subject. "Jenkinson can run you over. Don't forget to take your evening things with you."

Bertha packed an evening frock and its necessary adjuncts in a suitcase, and wrapped herself up in several coats, for the day was bitterly cold in spite of the sunshine—ice coated the pools and the pavements were slippery—and she did not wish to be obliged to have the car covered in. The car drew round to the front door, and Bertha climbed in ; Jenkinson tucked rugs round her in a fatherly manner. The shade of uneasiness apparent on his face caused Bertha to ask :

"Is the car running well to-day, Jenkinson?"

"Well, no, miss, I can't say she is," admitted Jenkinson, stroking the fat fingers of his leather gloves with a deprecating air. "Backfired several times this morning when I was taking Mr. West up to Mr. Robert's."

Bertha frowned.

"Perhaps I'd better go by train," she said distastefully.

"Oh, she'll go to Denbridge all right," Jenkinson assured her. "It's downhill nearly all the way."

This was true, for the hill from Hudley down to Denbridge was celebrated for its steep gradient and unpleasant curve. Bertha did not like motoring up and down this hill, and always sighed with relief when it was safely negotiated. She winced slightly now at the thought of it, and bade Jenkinson proceed. The car turned out of the Beech Lea grounds into the Lane, and out of the Lane into the main thoroughfare of Prince's Road. It certainly was not running well ; its speed was poor, and there was an undercurrent of noisy grating beneath its usual placid purr. Jenkinson glanced apolo-

getically over his shoulder at Bertha. They turned out of Prince's Road up a slight rise. Jenkinson changed the gear. The engine stopped. Jenkinson applied the brakes, and the car stood still. Bertha put on a look of patient martyrdom, and gazed at the blue sky. Jenkinson stooped down and pulled and pushed at various handles—nothing happened. He dismounted and lifted the bonnet and poked about inside, then climbed into the car once more and turned the switch. The engine ran languidly for a minute or two and then ceased action. Jenkinson dismounted and lifted the bonnet.

This cycle of occurrences was repeated several times without any apparent result, and Bertha began to shiver with cold and annoyance.

"I shall be frightfully late," she said crossly, looking at her watch. "I really think I'd better go down into Prince's Road and catch a tram to the station. Only there's sure not to be a train. Is there a timetable anywhere?"

Jenkinson extracted a timetable from one of the car's side pockets and respectfully read out a list of suitable trains. He evidently considered the car's condition hopeless for the time being.

"It's just possible I might catch that one," said Bertha. She disentangled herself from the rugs and stepped out. "But in all these coats! And what shall I do with my suitcase?"

"You'd best leave your heavy coat and your suitcase with me, miss," suggested Jenkinson patiently. "I shall get the car home somehow, and I can put her right in time to take Mr. and Mrs. West over to Denbridge to-night. I know what's the matter with her."

"But I want my case with me," said Bertha petulantly. She dragged the case out of the front of the car. "I dare say I could manage it to the tram," she continued, "and from the tram to the train; but it's such a very long way from Denbridge Station to the Hall."

She glared at Jenkinson, who surveyed her in silent wonder at the perversity of women in general and Miss

Bertha West in particular. Meanwhile the precious minutes were passing.

"I suppose I'd better leave it," said Bertha, yielding the point impatiently. She took off her thick furred gloves and began to undo the buttons of her outer coat.

"You'll have to hurry, Miss," suggested Jenkinson respectfully.

Bertha gave an exasperated sigh and tugged at the buttons. At this moment a new and very elegant fawn-coloured two-seater came round the corner from Prince's Road. William Irwell was driving it, with his chauffeur seated demurely beside him. He drew up, putting the foot-brake on abruptly.

"Hullo, Bertha!" he said, raising his very superior Homburg. "Anything wrong?"

"Oh, William!" cried Bertha, advancing into the road towards him, excited and distressed. "It's so tiresome! I'm supposed to be lunching at Lower Denbridge Hall at one o'clock, and look at the time now! and the car won't budge an inch! I shall have to go by train—but even then I'm afraid I shan't catch the 12.29. Do you think there are any taxis to be had round here?"

"What's the matter?" inquired William good humouredly of Jenkinson.

Jenkinson replied by a string of technicalities, to which William listened with the sympathetic attention of one who understands.

"I'll run you round myself," he announced presently to Bertha. "As it happens, I'm going that way—I'm off to Wakefield on business."

William's chauffeur was ordered to erect and occupy a small, unsafe-looking seat in the rear, and to nurse the suitcase; while Bertha, radiant with gratitude, rebuttoned her coat and climbed into the two-seater beside William. With much unction William produced a fur rug and arranged it about her knees. In a casual, offhand manner he dropped in the clutch, and the car shot cheerfully on its way.

"Is this a new car, William?" asked Bertha, really interested. "I don't think I've seen it before."

"Got it last week," replied William. "It's for my brother, really, just to run up and down to town in, but I'm giving it a trial spin to-day. Goes pretty well, doesn't she?"

"Beautifully," replied Bertha with enthusiasm.

The car was indeed travelling pretty fast; the air rushed past, bringing a lovely rose colour to Bertha's cheeks and disarranging her dark hair. Bertha was usually a nervous motorist; every difficult turn and dangerous cross-road round Hudley was known to her, and she pictured them to herself as she drove along; but to-day her nervousness was gone, and she felt nothing but exhilaration in the swift movement and William's skilful manipulation of the wheel. The sour-faced chauffeur behind sat like a carved idol with his arms crossed and Bertha's suitcase balanced upon his knees.

"Dash it all!" exclaimed William suddenly. "I have to call at my brother's office about a paper that I want to take with me to Wakefield. I'd forgotten it for the moment. I'm afraid I must go round that way. You don't mind, do you, Bertha? It won't delay us long."

With a quick turn of the wheel he sent the car swinging back towards the lower portion of Prince's Road. They reached the town and proceeded slowly along the main street, hooting vigorously, to the offices of Jennison and Irwell. Innumerable people saw Bertha West riding alone with William Irwell in his new car, and drew their own conclusions.

"Shan't be a minute," said William. He clambered over Bertha and disappeared up the stairs.

It was ten minutes before he returned. For ten long minutes Bertha sat in William Irwell's car in front of Ernest Irwell's office and waited dutifully for William to emerge. To her excited imagination it seemed that every person she knew in Hudley passed by and saw her there. Many people greeted her, and several asked if the car were

a new one of her father's. Bertha, trying not to blush, replied that it belonged to William Irwell—or to Ernest, she was really not quite sure which. Her questioners thereupon said "Really?" in varying tones of interest, and smiled with restrained but unmistakable significance, almost as though she had told them that she and William were engaged.

At length William came down, followed by the lame Ernest, who greeted Bertha with a flattering gallantry. The three talked and laughed together for a minute or two, and a clerk came down with some papers for William. Bertha had long since perceived that she would be late for lunch, but it did not trouble her in the least. William donned his thick gloves and took his seat, and soon the car was spinning along out of Hudley. They passed Eustace Hollins, who hastily snatched off his hat and admired Bertha's wind-blown hair, but Bertha did not see him.

The car approached Denbridge Hill.

"Now, William," coaxed Bertha in the tone of a newly married wife speaking to an indulgent husband, "*do go slowly down Denbridge Hill—I'm terrified of it.*"

"What? What did you say?" asked William, bending towards her, his brown eyes sparkling.

Bertha repeated her request in a slightly more affectionate tone.

"Are you afraid?" said William, much amused at this idea. He laughed heartily and uttered a teasing word or two. However, nothing pleased him better than to humour the caprices of a pretty woman, enjoying all the time in his superior masculine mind the knowledge that they were merely caprices and that he merely humoured them out of his own kindness of heart and that he could stop humouring them whenever he chose. He pulled various levers and pressed the foot-brake. The car sank almost at once into a walking pace. "Like that better?" he asked jocosely.

"Really, William!" protested Bertha, colouring

delightfully at the absurdly slow progress of the car. She pouted, and said with an air of wisdom: "There's moderation in all things."

William grunted, and allowed the car to proceed at a more reasonable pace. He was enjoying immensely this drive with Bertha through the keen, frosty air. Decidedly he must take steps to marry her as soon as possible.

"All this part of the journey lies off your route, William," observed Bertha apologetically, as they turned to the right under a railway bridge.

"You won't be very late, I think, after all," said William cheerfully, increasing the speed of the car.

"It doesn't much matter if I am," replied Bertha comfortably. Indeed, all such trifles as space, time, and other people's convenience were completely indifferent to her when she was in William's company.

The car turned into a long grey road which sloped steadily upwards through green fields, and roared abruptly under one arch of the long viaduct which spanned the valley. In the bottom of the valley, beside the turbid stream, stood a square, solid mill. Its date, "1870," carved on a broad stone above the entrance to the great mill-yard, and the brass plate bearing the name of Bertha's grandfather, its letters worn almost smooth by constant polishing, attested the long continuance of the Wests' prosperity. The imposing door, painted a bright yellowish-brown, glistened in the winter sunshine.

(Bertha's father, being a younger son, had never been in business with old John West; he had early migrated to Hudley and prospered there.)

Half-way up the hill Lower Denbridge Hall received a scanty shelter from a projecting spur of land, its mullioned windows gazing steadily across the green valley to the bleak slopes beyond.

Hudley boasts neither ancient castle nor old fortifications—the latter are, indeed, precluded by the town's hilly situation; but the surrounding hills and dales are dotted with moderate-sized gentleman's residences, built

in Elizabeth's days by small local squires and substantial yeomen. Lower Denbridge Hall was one of these; it had an interesting history, which was, of course, quite unknown to Bertha; to her it was simply a cold and inconvenient old house where her grandfather had dwelt till his death, and where her Aunt West, the widow of her father's eldest brother, now lived with her six children. Aunt West was essentially a country-bred woman, fair and hearty, with no nerves and a blunt frankness all her own. Her children resembled her; the girls were fair and buxom, almost fat, and always looked as though they were on the point of bursting out of their country-made evening dresses. They loved gardening and long walks and large dogs, and were extremely healthy and absolutely devoid of ideas. The eldest son was sometimes a trifle coarse, but the other boy was a fine lad, a splendid dancer and good at every kind of game, though quite unable to pass his law examinations and become a solicitor. The sophisticated town-bred Wests liked their country cousins, but were soon exhausted by their loud laughs and rather too obvious brainlessness. Still, the Denbridge Wests were a social asset; they lived in a "Hall" and thought no small things of themselves, and they had plenty of money and entertained the best Hudleian society lavishly. Bertha was quite glad that Lower Denbridge Hall was her present destination; the address sounded well, and the weather-beaten house itself had, even to her untutored eyes, a certain *ton* and impressiveness.

"They feel the weather pretty well up here, I'll be bound," observed William, turning up his coat-collar as the car climbed the hill.

Adroitly he steered between the stone gate-posts into the paved courtyard and drew up in front of the door. A loud barking of dogs arose. Aunt West and her youngest daughter and a yellow collie appeared at the door. Mrs. West was decidedly surprised to see Bertha sitting beside William Irwell—whose mother she knew pretty well—in a two-seater car.

"We'd given you up, Bertha," she announced in loud

cheerful tones. "We've begun lunch. Wherever have you been? Such telephonings to and from Beech Lea you never heard of!"

The dismounting Bertha coloured and related her experiences. Further daughters appeared, and the story had to be told again. William sat easily in the car, one arm resting on the wheel, and joined in the general badinage. Mrs. West talked on but kept an eye on him, and drew her own conclusions.

"How pleased William and Mary will be to have Bertha nicely settled!" she thought. "Quite time too." Aloud she said: "Now, Mr. Irwell, come in and have a bit of something warm before you go on to Wakefield."

"Can't be done, Mrs. West," said William with regretful firmness, glancing at his wrist-watch. "I have an appointment at two."

"You'll never get to Wakefield from here by two," announced Mrs. West with decision.

"Got to," replied William with equal decision and a polite smile. He looked at her squarely, and she perceived with pleasure that he was a man with whom it was useless to argue. She nodded her head with satisfaction and said:

"I suppose it's no use asking you to come to our little affair to-night? Your brother's coming, by his own request."

"Try me and see," said William, starting the car and looking at Bertha.

"We shall expect you at half-past seven, then," said Aunt West briskly. "We begin early and finish promptly at half-past eleven, because of its being Christmas Day next morning. Don't be late. Give my love to your mother."

"Certainly, Mrs. West," replied William cheerfully. He raised his hat, took a last look at Bertha, and whisked the car out of the courtyard and down the hill at a fine speed. His last faint hoot died away in the distance as the party entered the house.

Bertha was in high spirits; she joked and romped

through the afternoon with her cousins, helped cheerfully to pull furniture about, and arranged without a murmur large quantities of prickly holly which caught and pulled threads in her expensive silk jersey. She did not answer anyone snappishly, nor did a single ill-natured thought enter her head. At the very first opportunity she went to the telephone and rang up Beech Lea. Her sister answered the call.

"Gladys," began Bertha gaily. "I want you to do something for me. Will you? I want you to bring my violet evening dress and shoes and things with you to-night. I'll tell you where they are." She described the position of each particular article with unerring accuracy.

"Oh, Bertha!" protested Gladys in a worried tone. "I'm so fearfully busy with one thing and another, and it will take such an age to find all those things."

"Of course, I know it's awfully good of you, Glad, to stay at home and do all the work while I'm out like this," wheedled Bertha, magnaminously forbearing to mention the mince-tarts because she surmised from Gladys's voice that they had not turned out well. "But please do bring the frock and things—it won't take you a minute."

"Very well," agreed the good-natured Gladys. "We shall have to drive over in a taxi," she continued. "The car will be a week or ten days before it's right again. Isn't it tiresome? *Whose* car was it that picked you up? We didn't quite understand from Jenkinson's account."

"William Irwell's," said Bertha. There was a buzzing noise in the telephone, and Gladys did not hear the name; half laughing and half annoyed, the confused Bertha had to bellow "William Irwell!" into the receiver several times with increasing vigour.

"Oh! I see. William Irwell," said Gladys at last thoughtfully. "Really!"

Bertha rang off.

The evening came at last. Bertha had considerable difficulty in remaining unseen in her room until the arrival of Gladys with the violet frock and its accessories, and guests were already arriving while she was hurrying

into it, her cheeks brilliant with unwonted colour caused by her nervous anticipation.

The evening was in most respects extremely satisfactory. William and Ernest Irwell arrived punctually. Agatha Huntley, who came with her sister Isabel and Robert West, was attired in her childish high white frock, and looked hopelessly frightened and neglected. In the bridge drive which preceded supper Bertha contrived to win a prize, and so did William Irwell. After supper there was dancing in the square hall to the sound of a gramophone; William danced with Bertha with noticeable frequency. When he was not dancing with her her other partners teased her mildly about him, which she enjoyed. To almost every partner Bertha observed: "I really must go and sit out a dance with poor Ernest," but needless to say she never carried out this intention, though occasionally she smiled at him as she whisked past his chair in William's arms. She did not notice that the chair beside Ernest was usually occupied by the same girl, a fair-haired, quiet, oldish, soberly-dressed distant cousin of Aunt West's, a native of Denbridge; indeed, Bertha was too full of herself, her happiness, her beauty, her future husband, to notice anything or anybody who was not intimately connected with her own affairs.

Unfortunately William could not be brought to the point that evening; not that Bertha expected him to say in set terms: "I love you"—that was a ridiculous old-fashioned notion, long since exploded—but she did hope that he would say something which would put their relations on a different and more certain footing. She skirmished delicately round sentimental subjects, and William observed her skirmishing and was not displeased by it, but it was impossible for him to say anything of his desire for her that evening. The first halting sentences, incoherent with passion, in which he had tried to explain to Violet Huntley that he loved her and that love was a serious matter, had been uttered at just such another family party. The remembrance of his words and of Violet's foolish giggling answer haunted the evening and

hurt him, and he felt that to speak to Bertha then would be to spoil for him the whole business of marrying her.

He read in the general demeanour of the company the strong supposition that he and Bertha would shortly be engaged, and he was glad that it was so.

The party broke up amid much hilarity ; William Irwell kissed every female present—excepting Bertha—under the mistletoe before tenderly helping Ernest into the large closed car which awaited them in the courtyard. He would have liked to drive Bertha home, but this plan miscarried, and he was obliged to offer a lift to Arthur and Marjorie West, both of whom he cordially disliked.

The West party drove home and went yawningly to bed. Bertha lay awake for some time, recapitulating mentally the scenes of the day, and drawing the most favourable auguries from them all. The connection between Bertha's request for her violet frock and William's unexpected presence at the affair was too glaring to escape the notice of Gladys, who remarked upon the incident to her mother, her own dreams of a romance between Bertha and that nice lad Eustace Hollins fading mournfully away as she did so.

"I suppose we shall have to resign ourselves to it, William," observed Mrs. West as she took up her Bible from the little table beside her bed and opened it at the allotted portion.

"Resign ourselves to what?" queried Mr. West sharply.

"Bertha and William Irwell," replied his wife.

"It is a bitter thing to me," announced Mr. West with a certain dignified sincerity, "that a daughter of mine should wish to marry a man whose wife still lives, rich though he be. I would rather see her married to a poor bachelor than to William Irwell. But of course I shall not stand in Bertha's way ; she's not a child now, and I suppose she knows her own mind."

"I suppose so," corroborated Mrs. West, thinking pleasurably of William's half-million. "Bertha wouldn't be happy as a poor man's wife, you know, William."

"I suppose not," agreed Mr. West dourly.

CHAPTER VI

CHRISTMAS DAY

1.

WILLIAM IRWELL was awakened next morning by the sound of the chapel choir singing "Hail, smiling morn" beneath his bedroom window. He listened with sentimental amusement to their trills and flourishes, pleasantly conscious that he gave an ample subscription to the choir's yearly outing fund. Half asleep, he mused upon Bertha and her violet frock, and made up his mind that he would be married to her before Christmas came again. They might marry in June or July, and for their honeymoon he would take her a motor tour in Scotland or perhaps in Cornwall and Devon, which he had visited before. He would borrow Ernest's two-seater or perhaps buy a new one. He must see about a flat trunk to be strapped on to the rear of the car; for of course Bertha would want all her pretty clothes with her. He mentally drew up a list of large and magnificent hotels whose menus he remembered as good. Decidedly it was time the affair progressed. He descended to breakfast in a good humour, joked with the servants, and presented his lavish offerings to his mother and Ernest with real affection.

William's religion was of that kind which abominates agnostics and such queer fish but rarely takes its possessor to a place of worship; he made a point, however, of escorting his mother dutifully to chapel every Christmas Day. He even enjoyed the familiar hymns and psalms, and sometimes made resolutions to attend a little more frequently, but when the weather was fine he broke his resolutions deliberately and played golf. He intended,

however, to visit chapel more regularly when he should be married to Bertha.

Mrs. Irwell was a short stout woman of great strength of character, with a certain dignity of manner conferred on her by the stout-hearted endurance of many sorrows—Ernest's lameness, the loss of a dearly-loved daughter in girlhood, William's divorce, and the premature death of her husband and many members of her own family. She was silent and reserved, and though she attended many committees, she did not often make speeches at them, though from behind her double-lensed gold spectacles she saw and observed a good deal, and was a shrewd judge of human nature. She descended the stairs now, wrapped in magnificent furs, inserting her small, podgy hands into a new pair of spotlessly white gloves. Christmas was a sad time for her, for her husband had died on Christmas Eve, but she liked to go to chapel with William and Ernest, and especially to walk up the aisle between her two sons. She had attended Prince's Road Chapel all her life, been married there, and hoped to be buried in the graveyard which sloped away behind the building into the solid rock of the hillside.

The large car stood waiting at the entrance, the chauffeur respectfully holding open the door. There was a faint powdering of snow on the ground which had fallen in the early morning; Mrs. Irwell inquired why the car was not wearing its chains, and exhorted the chauffeur not to rush round corners. The postman, belated with extra Christmas traffic, came plodding up the drive. William, who was standing on the rubber mat in the porch, gave the man his Christmas-box and took the letters from him and sorted them out. There was one for Ernest from the girl to whom, if all went well, he was shortly to be engaged; there were two or three cards for Mrs. Irwell which that lady declined to look at as she was not wearing her reading-glasses; and there was one slim envelope for William. He opened it casually and glanced inside the enclosed Christmas card to see who had sent it.

"With love from Violet." The blood rushed to his face.

"Isn't she a little fool?" he muttered to himself, turning over the cheap card contemptuously. Round the edge was a narrow red border, and the outside bore the device of a wishing-bone—in gold—and the words "Good luck." William swore. The impudence of the thing! That Violet, his wife whom he had divorced for misconduct, should have the audacity to send him a twopenny Christmas card—on the left-hand top corner of the back page a pencil "2d." was still faintly visible—wishing him good luck was so utterly preposterous that he did not know whether to laugh or to be enraged. On the inside leaves of the card were two lines of doggerel—

"May every good thing come your way
From now until next Christmas Day"

—and a remark in prose: "At this season of the year all hearts should be reunited in affection."

"I'm damned if Violet's and mine shall be reunited!" said William to himself, with a grim laugh. "'Wishing you joy, peace, and all happiness this Christmas and throughout the New Year.' Well! She's an idiot! She's mentally defective. Must be."

"Aren't you coming, William?" said his mother from the car.

William crammed the card into his pocket and climbed into the motor. As they drove briskly along the white, glistening streets, he could not keep his thoughts from wandering to his erstwhile wife. How characteristic! How absolutely characteristic of her to send that idiotic card! He felt for it with one hand and visualized its cheap silliness, and his heart ached. He could just imagine her saying, with a foolish little giggle: "I'll send one to William. . . . What do you think? . . . Do you think he'd mind? . . . "Well," with an air of virtue, "it's Christmas-time, you know."

Oh, how utterly silly she was! And how wonderfully

and eternally feminine. The picture of her, with her prominent eyes and long nose, the tiny blue scar on one cheek where a mole had been removed, her fair hair draped away from her forehead in a fashion all her own which somehow made her look French, rose up before his eyes and blotted out the image of Bertha West. It was impossible to marry another woman while Violet haunted him like that. He remembered her mad but always soft-toned gaiety and her extraordinary lack of reserve on the most intimate subjects, her delightful coquetry when teased, her complete surface irresponsibility and carelessness, beneath which lay a clear and trustful childish nature, affectionate, warm-hearted, capricious. She was a trifle unbalanced, a little defective in common sense, perhaps hardly morally responsible. William groaned.

The car drew up in front of Prince's Road Chapel, and the Irwells entered the building. The service began; there were hymns and prayers, but William did not heed them. He was in torment. From where he sat, half-way up the aisle, he could see his wife's sister, Isabel West, with her gloomy boy on one side of her and her two bright little girls on the other. The silent, pompous Robert sat at the head of the pew. At the other end was Agatha Huntley, who was spending Christmas with her sister and brother-in-law. William surveyed the two women gloomily. Isabel, he thought, was better looking than his wife, and certainly more respectable in her ways. There was no denying that Violet's genus was allied to that of Cleopatra. Agatha was a stupid-looking little thing. She constantly rose and knelt down at the wrong times and with exaggerated movements, and at each mistake she blushed and hung her head miserably. William remembered that the Huntleys were Church people. Probably Agatha had been taught to be very good and "Churchy" at Charford, and did not like attending chapel with Isabel. William's lip curled; he had an honest scorn for highfalutin' Church ideas. No doubt Sir Melfield had sent Agatha to Charford on purpose to have her turned out as

a good, pious, dowdy girl, fond of Sunday-school teaching and shocked at music-halls; no doubt he was terrified lest his youngest child, motherless from her birth, should prove to be another Violet. Well, he had succeeded; Agatha was dowdy enough in all conscience. Stupid little thing! William felt a sudden unreasonable anger against Agatha; her drooping, miserable face had something of that same quality of silly helplessness which he had known so well in his wife. He glared at Agatha between his fingers during the interminable prayers.

In the opposite aisle Bertha, full of good thoughts and unselfish humbleness, offered up prayers for her speedy marriage to William.

"Of course, the minister is praying about something else, but it doesn't matter; you can put what you like into it," she told herself naïvely, and repeated, clenching her hands together in her muff to emphasize her earnestness: "O God, do please let me marry William soon. Let him ask me this week. I could be ever so good married to him. I know I'm very selfish and all that, and some people wouldn't think that I could be quite nice and good tempered, but *I know I can.*"

Having said this, her attention relaxed; she made one or two efforts to concentrate on the minister's words, then gave up the attempt and peeped furtively through her fingers at William. The lower part of his face was properly covered with his hand, but his eyes were unmistakably turned towards Agatha Huntley.

The rush of feeling which accompanied this discovery quite frightened Bertha by its intensity. She muttered obscure threatenings to the Deity:

"If it is so . . . I don't know what I shall do. I don't know *what* I shall do."

In some vague way this warning to Providence seemed to Bertha to relieve her of all blame for any actions she might commit if and when William should become engaged to Agatha Huntley. It was as good as saying:

“If you dare to upset my plans like that, I warn you . . . there will be trouble.”

Cross and egoistical feelings rushed back into Bertha at once, and Gladys's side view, her face buried devoutly in her hands, and her coat strained awkwardly across her shoulders by her bent arms, irritated her intensely.

2.

There had been trouble in the Hollins family that morning. Eustace had gone out the day before and ordered a carriage to attend the house on Christmas morning to take his mother to chapel. The trams did not run in the morning on Sundays and holidays, and as Mrs. Hollins's gout had made it impossible this winter for her to walk so far, it was some time since she had attended her usual place of worship, Prince's Road Chapel. To Eustace himself there was no pleasure in driving to chapel, nor, indeed, in going there at all, for he was not even a Deist, much less a Christian; but he was quite able to understand that it would give his mother pleasure to go, and had counted out his hard-earned shillings to the cab proprietor cheerfully and with a warm glow of virtue. He kept his little secret until the next morning, when at breakfast Mrs. Hollins began to lament her inability to attend chapel, and then had a happy minute revealing it to her.

“Well, really, I'm sure it's very thoughtful of you, Eustace,” said Mrs. Hollins, striving to be effusive. Privately she was annoyed; she wanted to go to chapel, certainly, but she would have much preferred the nice pair of gloves or stockings which Eustace could have bought for her with the money he had spent on the cab. She regarded it as still another indication of his hopeless unpracticality that he should thus minister to her spiritual needs rather than to her material wants. She was also annoyed because Eustace was not in Sabbath attire, and she went to dress in a bad mood.

Daisy was charmed at the idea of driving to chapel, and she was also charmed with the exquisite feather fan which was Eustace's present to her—bought out of money earned by coaching Bobbie; she looked bright and happy, and leant on his shoulder as he gazed out of the window down the terrace.

The pseudo-carriage drove up, and Eustace and Daisy began jokingly to admire the horse's fine tail and harness. Lizzie came across the room to them, still clad in her morning blouse.

"How shall you like driving behind that fiery steed, Liz?" said Eustace to her affectionately.

"I'm not going to chapel," said Lizzie, with a resigned sniff. "I'm going to stay in and cook the dinner."

"Oh, my dear girl, that's quite unnecessary," expostulated Eustace. "Just shove it in the oven before you go, and I'll keep an eye on it and baste it or whatever you call it."

"Don't you intend to come to chapel with me, Eustace?" inquired Mrs. Hollins, who had just entered the room.

"No, mother," said Eustace firmly. He coloured, however, and his heart beat faster. On ordinary Sundays he evaded this discussion by pleading work in term time and the need for rest in the holidays.

"Why not?" said Mrs. Hollins sharply.

"I don't wish to do so—you know it means nothing to me," replied Eustace, trying to appeal to her reasonable side.

"Then I shall not go," said Mrs. Hollins, who liked nothing better than making a martyr of herself. She compressed her lips and sat down on the sofa and began to remove her gloves.

Eustace temporarily lost his temper.

"Of course you'll go," he said hotly. "Don't be so ridiculous, mother."

"I shall not go without you," said Mrs. Hollins in a firm tone.

"Then what am I to do about the carriage?" asked Eustace with assumed calm, inwardly furious at his mother's obstinacy and bitterly disappointed at the failure of his plan to give her pleasure.

"Whatever you choose—it's nothing to me, I'm sure," replied Mrs. Hollins, triumphant at this opportunity of expressing her real feelings about the cab.

Eustace winced.

"You and Lizzie and Daisy can go, mother," he said, making a last effort to be polite and reasonable. "I will stay at home and look after the dinner. Lizzie would like to go, I know."

"I shall not go without you," repeated Mrs. Hollins with lofty indifference.

"Then stay at home!" shouted Eustace furiously. "I'm absolutely sick and tired of trying to please you—absolutely sick and tired of it."

Daisy began to cry, Lizzie blinked nervously, and Mrs. Hollins raised her veil and took out a handkerchief.

"I never thought to see the day *you* would bully me, Eustace," she said, and gave vent to sobs.

Eustace's anger evaporated and was replaced by nausea.

"Come, mother," he said wearily, sick at heart at this failure—one more to add to his long list. "Don't cry. What do you want me to do? Go to chapel with you? Very well, I'll go. It's against my conscience and my principles, but I'll go. But what about Lizzie?"

"I'll stay at home—I'd just as soon," said Lizzie incoherently, much relieved at this subsiding of the storm.

Eustace shrugged his shoulders and went upstairs to make himself presentable for chapel. Mrs. Hollins declined to accept his suggestion that she should start without him and that he would overtake them; she sat fuming with ill-concealed impatience on the dining-room sofa while Eustace, in a dark mood, changed into his blue suit. He came downstairs with his forehead corrugated

into horizontal frowns and lines of worry tugging at the corners of his fine mouth.

“Well, are we ready?” he inquired in a disgusted tone.

Mrs. Hollins mounted the carriage steps in a stately manner; Daisy followed; Eustace climbed in last and shut the door. Lizzie, of course, remained at home to cook the dinner.

“What a pitiable weak fool I am!” meditated Eustace gloomily. “Why can’t I bully mother for once and make her behave decently? She’s ruined Lizzie’s life. And I can see it, I can see and understand it all, and I stand by and do nothing. A pitiable weak fool. No one would mistake me for a man.”

Service had already begun when the trio reached the chapel. They hurried uncomfortably to their seats, squashing past a row of people, who returned Mrs. Hollins’s hostile glare with interest and scowled scornfully at the hot and embarrassed Eustace, who, in his usual headlong and somewhat careless manner, stumbled over hassocks and grasped at the pew division to save himself from falling.

Of the trio, William, Bertha, and Eustace, the un-Christian Eustace was the only one who paid the slightest attention to the service. He carefully analysed every hymn and prayer, seeking for its fundamental truths, answering its—as he thought—feeble arguments, and conscientiously applying all the sinful attributes mentioned to himself. The humiliation of being compelled by a woman to take part in a worship which he thought false stained his cheeks and bowed his head. He thought of Henley’s famous lines:

“I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul,”

and decided bitterly that to no man on earth had they ever been less applicable than to himself. He was bitterly ashamed of himself, and hated his person to such a degree that the sight of his hands—which he usually

rather admired—holding the hymn-book was really distasteful to him. During the minister's address, whenever any virtuous act was mentioned, he said to himself : " Do I act like that?" and invariably replied with scorn : " No !"

Happening to catch the quotation " not slothful in business," he proceeded to a fierce accusatory monologue.

" That's just what I am—slothful, hopelessly slothful. I simply sit still and let things happen to me. It's feeble. It's disgusting. Why can't I be a man of action and not a dreamer? I must stop dreaming and *do* something. I must get out of Hudley for a while and throw myself into my profession. If I starve, so much the better. (Melo-dramatic idiot !" he apostrophized himself in a parenthesis, and answered : " Yes, that's all very well, but that's what I always do—the minute I think about *doing* something I begin to criticise my idea and pull it to pieces, and end by doing nothing at all.")

He decided in a sudden flash of inspiration that he would write to every soul he knew who was, however remotely, connected with the profession of literature. There was, for instance, a man in Edinburgh who had been friendly with Eustace at school and in France, whose father was an editor. There was a man who had once taught and liked Eustace whose brother was on the staff of a London paper. There were others. He blenched suddenly at the thought of thus impertinently addressing himself to mere acquaintances and soliciting favours, and began a tough fight against his long-established habit of depreciatory self-analysis.

" Other people do it," he argued stubbornly with his over-fastidious self. " There's no harm in it. They needn't answer the letters if they don't wish to do so. I shall certainly write."

Instantly he was in a fever of desire to write and post the letters—actions which he visualized in their smallest detail. Phrases thronged his brain. On Tuesday the letters would reach their destinations; by Thursday or

Friday he might reasonably become excited at the prospect of replies. Each visit from the postman would cause him a delicious thrill, and a typewritten envelope would seem pregnant with destiny. Above all, he might here and now admit to his breast hope, to Eustace a *rara avis* which seldom condescended to fold its wings and dwell with him.

He fidgeted restlessly up and down in anticipatory rapture until Daisy felt that she should scream if he did not soon desist, and Mrs. Hollins yearned to box his ears.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE PARK

1.

To Bertha in her then confused and troubled state of mind the New Year visit of her Uncle Dick came as an intense irritation. All her thoughts and feelings were occupied with her stationary love-affair, and it was annoying to have to put them on one side and call up the set of sentiments proper to uncles, and in particular to Uncle Dick.

Dick Irvine was Mrs. West's solitary and well-loved brother. He was extremely rich, and had retired from business many years ago and betaken himself to live in Harrogate. Tall and thin, with greyish hair which had once been ginger, restless, cynical, free-thinking, abrupt, unconventional, rude, and sarcastic, he was the very antithesis and certainly the detestation of the pompous and solemn Mr. West. His visits to Beech Lea formed a series of catastrophes, and before his departure from Hudley he generally contrived to irritate every relative he had. (His only child, Edith, who resembled him closely, was that married cousin at whose house in London Gladys had spent part of the previous October, returning thence with such a lamentable report of Edith's delicate little boy. Edith was a great friend of Marjorie West's, and had stoutly fought that young lady's battles in the trying days of her engagement to Arthur.) Since the death of his wife a few years ago, Mr. Irvine had wandered up and down the globe like a lost spirit, raging about passport difficulties, scoffing at all the world's marvels, and picking up curious stories illustrative of the mercenary side of human nature in small towns whose names he

always professed himself unable to pronounce. He had been invited to Beech Lea for Christmas, but had declined in his usual rude and caustic manner, announcing at the same time that if his affairs happened to call him to Hudley he would drop in and see his sister at the New Year.

True to his word he arrived at four o'clock on New Year's Eve with a bulging portmanteau. The Wests' hearts sank. By five o'clock the tension was acute—unfortunately it was a very snowy and windy day, and Mr. West happened to be at home; the family sat round the study fire, and, in spite of Mrs. West's strenuous efforts, the conversation turned towards politics. Mr. West's sallow face was flushed, and he was trying in vain to marshal the heavy guns of his pompous sentences under a rapid cross-fire of sarcastic interjections from his brother-in-law. Mrs. West looked appealingly at her daughters, and Bertha took the hint, rose, and, going into the kitchen, ordered the now recovered Annie to get tea in as soon as possible. Annie was annoyed, because, as she repeatedly insisted, it was impossible to accelerate the roasting of a chicken; however, she did her best, and soon the gong sounded.

"Bless me!" observed Mr. Irvine with exaggerated surprise. "Do you still have high tea here? I haven't had a high tea for years."

Mrs. West flushed, and Bertha said pertly:

"A change will do you good, uncle."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" remarked her uncle with an ominous inflection.

The meal began; mollified by the well-cooked fowl and the hot tea Mr. Irvine became a little milder, and Mr. West strove to display a Christian and hospitable spirit.

"Shall you be staying up in the North long, Dick?" he asked with an assumption of interest.

"I'm leaving here by the four-thirty train on January the second," announced Mr. Irvine sharply, rather as though he suspected his brother-in-law of wanting to be rid of him.

“How is Edith, uncle?” asked Gladys hastily.

“Oh, pretty fair, pretty fair,” replied Mr. Irvine. He relapsed deliberately into Yorkshire speech to provoke the punctilious Mr. West. “I mak nowt o’ her husband’s folks.”

“Really?” said Mrs. West, deeply interested.

Mr. Irvine related with gusto two or three instances of the feeble conduct of his daughter’s relations-in-law. The Wests expressed proper sympathy, and the conversation “went” better.

“And when are *you* going to be married, eh, Bertha?” inquired her uncle jovially and with no malicious intent. “You’ve always a two-three young men hanging about, I reckon. When are you going to tie up with one?”

“Oh, pretty soon. I’ll let you know in time for you to send me a wedding present, uncle,” replied Bertha airily, her heart aching with this rough handling. She riposted abruptly: “How’s Edith’s little boy?”

“Not so well just now,” said Mr. Irvine. “Been a hard winter, you know. He’ll pick up all right in the spring, I make no doubt.”

“Bonnie’s such a dear little thing,” said Bertha in a gush of simulated auntish affection.

Mr. Irvine said nothing, but his hands shook a little as he cut his portion of chicken. He felt that he was now becoming an old man; Edith was his only child, and that her only child should be a delicate, fretful, peevish boy galled his fierce pride and daunted his lonely old heart. He loved Bonnie—as who did not?—but it was gall and wormwood to him to see her fat rosy cheeks and firm little body and frank, affectionate ways, and contrast them in his mind with his own pale, flabby, and really rather unattractive grandchild. His rough but strong sense of justice would not allow him to withdraw his favour from his daughter’s friend Marjorie—whom he cordially admired—because her child was bonnier than Edith’s; on the contrary, he was extraordinarily kind to the Arthur Wests, heaping upon them library subscriptions and concert tickets and occa-

sional grotesque gifts like prize cauliflowers, in order to make up for the jealous envy he felt for them in his heart. But to broach the subject of his grandchild abruptly was to tear open an old wound with ungentle hands. He hated Bertha for doing it, and he hated her for driving him to his feeble defence about the "hard winter."

"There's a lot of engagements going about just now, I hear," he said, subconsciously realizing that Bertha had shrunk from this subject, and therefore harping upon it.

He was rewarded by her sudden access of colour and abrupt "Whose?"

In a drawling and languid manner he cited one or two. Bertha gave a short scornful laugh.

"Those are *months* old, uncle," she told him. In spite of herself, there was a slight tone of relief in her voice, and Mr. Irvine, who was a shrewd and caustic observer of mankind, noted it and put the note away in his mind for future use.

New Year's Day was not a success. Mr. Irvine went over to Bradford in the afternoon with the intention of going to a pantomime there; he could not secure a seat, and returned in the middle of the afternoon very cold and disgruntled. He sneezed several times during the evening, demanded a fire in his bedroom, and complained bitterly because Beech Lea was not centrally heated. The next morning he descended to breakfast lost in a cold, and consequently very bad tempered.

"You'd much better have stayed in bed with a hot bottle, Dick," Mrs. West admonished him. "Of course, you won't go back to London to-day."

"I shall," her brother contradicted her. "And what's more, I'm going to Arthur's for lunch."

"To Arthur's!" exclaimed Mrs. West, ruffled out of her usual placidity. "And pray, what for? What do you expect to get at Arthur's? They've no maid, or next door to none, and Marjorie does all her own cooking."

"And what of it?" snapped Mr. Irvine. "She's a grand lass, and I defy you to say aught against her."

"I've no wish to say anything against my son's wife," replied Mrs. West with dignity. "I simply state that it's inconsiderate of you to drop in unexpectedly on a small household like that and expect to be given a three-course lunch."

"Who said anything about a three-course lunch?" inquired Mr. Irvine furiously. "As for my being unexpected, they've known for a week or more. I wrote to them by the same post I wrote to you."

"In that case, Richard, the matter is different," said Mrs. West, still flushed and stilted.

Mr. Irvine sniffed angrily.

It was a relief to the whole family when at length he departed, taking his portmanteau with him. He scornfully declined to make use of Jenkinson and the car, telephoned for a taxi and fumed outrageously at its lateness, and threw a farewell taunt at each member of the family before he finally drove off down the Lane.

In the afternoon Mrs. West desired Bertha to accompany her to town and do some shopping. Bertha did not wish to go, for thick snow still lay on the ground, and her high-heeled, thin-soled walking-shoes were not comfortable in snow; but Mrs. West, still fluttered and unlike herself from her recent encounter with her disturbing brother, insisted, and the two women left the house, swathed in furs.

They visited various provision shops and then turned their steps towards Hollins's, the chief Hudley confectioner. John Hollins, who was not even remotely related to Eustace—the name is so exceedingly frequent in Hudley that no one thought of connecting the two—possessed, or his workpeople possessed, the art of baking pies and cakes better than any other confectioner in the district, and consequently his shop was always full and his counters lined with two rows of weary but determined customers. In vain did he attempt to secure extra floor space; he was sandwiched in between two banks who would not yield a jot of room, and when, as occasionally

happened, he opened branch shops in desperation, they soon gained an excessively large clientèle without apparently diminishing the crowd that flocked to the original Hollins's. In the window stood several superbly iced cakes which had not been sold before Christmas, flanked by small gâteaux of every description carelessly and hurriedly arranged by the overworked assistants.

Mrs. West's countenance became illuminated.

"There are only four people inside, Bertha, I do believe!" she cried in a tone of joyful surprise.

The two women entered. Mrs. West's estimate had been a trifle too optimistic; there were six people standing at the long marble counter, behind which harassed assistants with untidy hair dashed to and fro in a vain endeavour to find brown loaves and sponge buns when the last of these desirable articles had been sold out hours ago. Among the six was Mr. Irvine, who was just receiving a round cardboard box tied up with string in one hand and counting out silver with the other.

"Why, Dick!" exclaimed Mrs. West, much fluttered. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm buying a cherry cake to take to Edith," observed Mr. Irvine dourly. (Hollins's was celebrated for its cherry cakes.) His gaze lit upon Bertha, and he announced with grim satisfaction: "I hear young Irwell's engaged—happened only this morning. Some fair girl or other, much younger than himself—or older; I forget which."

"Agatha Huntley?" suggested Bertha in a cold tone.

"Very like," said Mr. Irvine indifferently, counting his change. "I don't just remember the name. Bye-bye, Mary." He nodded to his sister, touched the brim of his hat, and left the shop quite unconscious of the significance his words had held for his niece.

Bertha passed through one moment when everything was black, and she winced shudderingly away from this terrible blow of destiny. When she returned to herself she seemed to have been so long away that she was sur-

prised to see everything looking just the same—her own hands clasped through her muff, her silver bag dangling from one wrist, the comfortable contours of her mother's figure bending slightly over the counter, the inquiring air and upraised pencil of the assistant, the long glass bottles of sugared almonds, the rows of round brown teacakes, the trays of sugary buns and iced cakes in crinkly papers, the golden loaves. Every detail of the scene was stamped indelibly upon Bertha's mind, and she remembered it as long as she lived. The scent of sugar which impregnated the air was nauseating. Bertha turned abruptly to her mother :

"I'll go on and get that silk you want," she said in a thick strangled voice. "It's tiresome waiting here so long."

"Very well, love," said Mrs. West, who was preoccupied with her weekly order, and did not suspect Bertha's tragedy.

Bertha left the building and hurried wildly along the streets to the draper's shop. She had no conscious thoughts, but in her subconsciousness was crystallizing a decision. It was while she held between shaking fingers the skeins of embroidery silk and strove to force her mind to decide which most nearly matched the piece of material which lay on the counter that this decision as it were oozed up into the top layer of her mind. She paid for the silk hastily, and when she was once more outside in the snowy street she turned her steps towards the Municipal Institute. She went in that direction with the intention of seeking Eustace Hollins—partly because she had long ago half-seriously assigned to him this rôle of second string, partly also because in her present state of frenzy the name above the confectioner's shop had struck a chord of memory and suggested a course of action.

Just at the corner where the quiet road which held the Institute turned off from the street there stood a "broker's" shop, in the window of which brass candlesticks, china figures, suites of furniture, birdcages, old books, and bedsteads jostled one another in sordid ranks

of misery. Bertha paused and gazed into the window, and her reasoning powers began again to work, though still in nightmarish fashion. The solid mass of the Institute stood but a few hundred yards away; it looked very black and forbidding, and one of its iron gates was shut. Perhaps the Christmas holidays were not yet over. What was the date?

"The day after New Year's Day," Bertha told herself, and had to go through a complicated mental process before she extracted the fact that the date was January the second. Then it was still far too early in the year for the Institute's term to have begun. In any case, the time was but a quarter to four, and the afternoon classes did not cease till—what time did they cease? Bertha wrung her hands inside her muff. Then she turned and began to walk aimlessly towards the Institute.

She had covered perhaps half the distance when she saw a man run lightly down the steps and through the half-closed gates. It was indubitably Eustace Hollins. He had, in fact, been there by appointment—the term did not open till the following week—to discuss with the Principal the question of his resignation, which he had sent in a few days ago in a spasm of energy following his writing of the letters decided upon on Christmas Day. Come what should, he would not remain any longer in Hudley doing work which he disliked and which he was not really competent to undertake. He had not yet received any replies to his letters—nor had he told his mother of his resignation from the Institute—and he was feeling intensely bright and hopeful, full of gaiety and romance. As he came down the road he whistled softly to himself :

"A wandering minstrel I,
A thing of shreds and patches . . ."

This was a very good sign; it indicated that his writing was going well and that in spite of everything he was finding life worth while. (When a manuscript was refused he hummed the duet from "Madame Butterfly," and when

one was actually accepted he loudly sang "Toreador." But this happened very rarely. . . .)

When Bertha saw him the weight on her heart lifted, and she made a mental note that she would thank God that night in her prayers for this piece of consideration on His part. She instantly swung round and began to walk slowly towards the street in the same direction as Eustace, so that he would necessarily overtake her before she reached the corner. All these calculations were made, and the ensuing actions directed, by her subconscious self; her ordinary everyday will and conscience stood by and watched in grim silence.

Eustace passed her.

"Oh, Mr. Hollins, is it you?" said Bertha, stopping.

"Good-afternoon, Miss West. Isn't it a jolly day?" observed Eustace, sniffing the keen air joyfully. He adapted himself to her previous slow pace, and the two walked on together.

"Is it? I really hadn't noticed," began Bertha. (How short a distance separated them from the street!) She plunged: "I'm so miserable to-day that I hadn't noticed the weather."

"Really?" said Eustace, interested at once. People in trouble or simply feeling down-hearted made an unfailing call upon his sympathies, for he was a connoisseur in misery. "Is anything special the matter?"

"No," lied Bertha. *What* should she do to ensure a *tête-à-tête* with him? At the street corner, of course, he would raise his hat and leave her. She caught sight of wrought iron gates on the other side of the road. "Should we go through the park?" she suggested. "It isn't much further round."

It was at least a quarter of an hour's walk "further round"; also at this season of the year the gates were shut daily at half-past four. Eustace knew both these facts perfectly well, but being a chivalrous person he did not mention them, but steered at once across the road to the gate. They passed in between smoke-blackened

rockeries and depressed rhododendrons, their black leaves hanging down at curious angles, stiff with frost.

Bertha meant to be engaged to Eustace Hollins before they left the park. She could not, she absolutely could not, emerge from these solitudes into the lighted town and face the fact of William Irwell's engagement without some talisman which should show to all comers that she, Bertha, cared not the least in the world for William Irwell. Eustace Hollins would be just such a talisman if he could be persuaded to accept the part.

They strolled down the asphalt path towards a sinuous pond. In summer brownish ducks with cheerful green necks dwelt in this pond and swam hither and thither, receiving scraps of bread from the hands of children, and the scene was lively and full of noise and colour; but now the water was coated with ice, the children were absent, the ducks stood mournfully on the bank in hunched attitudes of boredom, and the place looked desolate and depressing in the winter twilight.

"Rather dismal, I'm afraid," said Eustace in his melodious voice.

"Let's sit here for a minute or two," suggested Bertha, subsiding on to a cold wooden seat.

Eustace thought that this idea of sitting on a hoary seat and gazing at a frozen pond on an extremely cold winter's afternoon was almost mad enough to be one of his own fantastic whims, and he sat down beside Bertha feeling that the situation was piquant and entertaining.

A few seconds passed. Bertha began to wonder what her mother was thinking of her abrupt departure and protracted absence, and the thought of home and relatives nerved her to further effort. She cast about in her mind for something "clever" to say.

"I'm so miserable at home," she said, turning her beautiful face to Eustace.

"Really? I shouldn't have thought you were," observed Eustace thoughtfully, wondering whether he had misjudged her capacity for emotion.

"There's no scope," said Bertha, making a sideways movement with her hands and congratulating herself on the word; "no scope for—anything. Of course, I know I'm not clever or anything of that kind, but still one can't help feeling sometimes that Hudley is rather sordid."

Eustace stared at her in amazement; he could not believe that such sentiments, coming from Bertha, were genuine. (They were not.)

"Really?" he stammered. "I'd no idea you felt like that."

Bertha had a moment of despair; it was hopeless to attempt so much in so short a time. But oh, to have to return to Beech Lea with light, easy explanations of her lengthy absence, and to ring up Agatha and congratulate her! Large tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

Eustace could not bear to see pain and misery in anyone; even when arguing with his enemies he could not bear to triumph; he would always rather endure defeat himself than inflict the pain of it on others. To see anyone crying, especially anyone as weak and silly as Bertha, wrung his heart.

"Don't cry," he begged in real distress. "Please don't cry. Is there anything I can do? Is there anything special that is—er—upsetting you?"

"No," lied Bertha between her sobs. She lifted her dark eyes, brimming with tears, to his face, and said shakily: "I'm so *lonely*."

This was her *chef-d'œuvre*. Eustace knew the book of loneliness from cover to cover; he knew its triumphs and its misery, and a fellow-sufferer took the path straight to his heart.

"I'm so sorry," he said, genuinely moved. "I'm so awfully sorry."

His arm, which was resting along the back of the seat, slipped down to Bertha's shoulders in a spontaneous gesture of pity and affection. Bertha was not looking at him now; her head was bent, her body drooped, from time to time a sob shook her shoulders; there was a helpless

passivity about her attitude which hurt the sensitive Eustace profoundly. To comfort her, much in the same way that he would have patted a dog which had hurt its paw, or stroked a weeping child's curls, he put his lips to the pale, yielding face and kissed her. Her cheek was soft and warm and wet with tears; a sob welled up in her delicate throat and shook her body beneath his encircling arm; the soft warm fur on her shoulders was very near his face. Feelings which had grown dim since the night of the concert now glowed in his heart with sudden unexpected warmth; he kissed her again, and stammered with incoherent ardour that he hoped they might be friends.

Bertha raised her eyes to his. At that moment she was so relieved and grateful that she almost loved him. She smiled a pretty, tremulous smile and said:

"You don't really care anything about me . . ."

"I do, I do," said the fatuous Eustace ardently. He knew so intimately that bitter phase of self-depreciation when the unfortunate sufferer tells himself: "Nobody cares twopence about you; why should they?" and he was eager to rescue Bertha from this wretched experience through which he imagined she was passing. "Honestly I do, Bertha," he said, and had a qualm. Perhaps he ought not to have called her "Bertha"; but under the circumstances how could he call her anything else? It was stupid conventionality even to think of addressing her as "Miss West." She was lonely and miserable and needed reassuring; she needed the most disinterested sympathy and the most generous response to her confidence that he could give her, and she should have it.

"Do you really?" murmured Bertha.

"Of course. Surely you don't need to be told that," protested Eustace.

Bertha allowed her tired body to take a more comfortable and intimate position with regard to Eustace's arm. She was very tired; worn out with the emotional strain of the afternoon, she closed her eyes and let her head sink back almost on to Eustace's shoulder. How-

ever, things were all right now; she would get over her feeling for William Irwell, and no one should ever know that it had existed. Why did not Eustace kiss her again? His previous efforts had been rather pleasant. In Bertha's defence it must be stated that she never doubted but that Eustace was madly in love with her. True, she had deliberately induced in him this desirable state of heart; but she never suspected that the effect of her Prince's Road Terrace and concert machinations had worn off.

In the distance the park ranger blew a shrill blast on his whistle to indicate that he was about to close the gates. Bertha languidly opened her eyes.

"I suppose that means we must go," she said with fond reluctance.

"Er—yes," agreed Eustace, not quite so reluctant. He withdrew his arm, a trifle embarrassed by its recent adventures.

The two rose and made their way towards a gate. The winter twilight was now deepening into dusk, Bertha's figure had become a huddled mass of fur, and her high heels clicked sharply on the asphalt paths which had been swept clear of snow. Perhaps it was this prosaic sound which recalled Eustace to his senses. A cold wave of reason swept over him, and he realized with a shiver that he had said—and done—things to Bertha which she might reasonably interpret as a declaration of love. Surely not! He was aghast at the mere idea. He ought not to have made use of her Christian name; certainly he ought not to have kissed her. The first kiss was not blameworthy, it indicated pure pity; but he was not so sure about the second. There was rather more of a "Then come kiss me, sweet-and-twenty, Youth's a stuff will not endure" touch about that second kiss. Bertha, of course, was a good deal more than twenty—older than himself, he should surmise. Decidedly he ought not to have kissed her. And yet, why not? It had been an interesting experience for him, and possibly for her. Her fur brushing his cheek like that was a good notion; he must work it in for his

present heroine. Unfortunately she acted her love scene in a ball dress, confound her! Carefully he began to rearrange the incidents of the story so that at the crucial moment the heroine should wear a fur.

"When will you come in and see me?" asked Bertha abruptly. She was feeling nervous and embarrassed, and wanted to find out just how things stood between Eustace and herself.

"Oh—er——" began Eustace vaguely.

"To-night?" suggested Bertha firmly.

"To-night?" repeated Eustace. "Really I——"

"And then you can see father," said Bertha, rather sick at heart of her own persistence.

Eustace perceived, with a sharp pang of horror, that it was as he had feared. Of course, he ought now to say something cold and firm. He knew it, and he repeatedly urged himself to do so; but he had never in his life said anything cold and firm to anybody, and he certainly could not begin with a girl whose tears he had but five minutes ago kissed away. Really—what was he to say?

"Will you come to-night?" pleaded Bertha sweetly.

Eustace cleared his throat. For one horrid minute he had a vision of Bertha's world—a world where the words "engaged" and "seeing father" were still fashionable and still meant something serious. For a moment he stood poised upon the brink of this world, and then his incapacity to wound others pushed him in.

"Yes," he said lamely. ("Fool! Idiot! You know perfectly well you don't care a button for her!" shouted his angry reason. "I know," he replied weakly, "but what on earth am I to do to get out of it?")

They had reached the park gates. "I think I'll go home alone," said Bertha faintly. She halted deliberately and turned up to him her pale face, which in the light of the street lamp still showed traces of tears.

"I shall have to see this thing through, I suppose," thought Eustace. He dutifully kissed her upturned cheek.

They parted.

2.

Eustace trudged home with his mind in a whirl. Since leaving Derwent Terrace that afternoon his world had turned upside down. Item one : without any definite plan for the future, and without the consent of his mother, he had given in his resignation to the Institute ; it would take effect and he would leave his present employment in early May. Item two : he had contrived to get himself engaged to Bertha West. At this utterly preposterous and ridiculous idea he laughed aloud rather grimly, and people turned to look at him in alarm.

"The whole thing is a nightmare," Eustace told himself consolingly, and went so far as to pinch himself. But as he showed no signs of waking up, he meditated further on the astounding thing that had happened to him. "Of course it's true," he admitted ruefully, "that once or twice I *have* felt inclined to make love to her—she's pretty and all that. But this situation is absolutely of her own making ; I hadn't anything to do with it at all—not much, anyway," he added, his conscience pricking him about that second kiss. "And I can't do anything but walk like a lamb to the slaughter. But what can she possibly want with me? I've no money and no position, and I'm not her sort at all. What a fearful time I shall have at Beech Lea to-night !"

It came to him again that he ought to rebel against this trick of the Fates, put his foot down, and firmly decline to take part in it, or courteously and gently—in a letter to Bertha—extricate himself from it. But even as he thought this he remembered Bertha's limp body, her tearful face, the way her shoulders shook when she sobbed, and he knew that he would never be able to hurt her ; his destiny was stamped indelibly upon him ; he was at the mercy of every person, whether weaker or stronger than himself, because he could not bear to cause them pain. He was such a coward at the thought of other people's suffering that he would tell lies and do other things which

his soul abhorred in order to avoid it, and very often by weakly so doing he plunged them into far more misery than a straightforward opposition would have caused them. He knew all this about himself and was ashamed of it—just now he burned with the shame of his own weakness—but he could not change his inherent shrinking.

“It’s Kismet,” he said, shrugging his shoulders as he turned into Derwent Terrace.

His imagination, reaching out into the future, was already picturing himself as Bertha’s husband; he saw the constant jars, the mutual friction, Bertha’s capriciousness, her tears, his own generous attempts to be reasonable and kind to her, the moments of affection which the long intimacy of marriage must necessarily bring. He saw that Bertha would hamper him in his work, depress him and despise him, just as his mother did; but he saw also, in the warm glow of fancy, his own capacity for feeling and expressing deepened and widened by this strange, rare adventure of marriage with a nature so utterly foreign to his own. As he ascended the steps of his house, he was imagining himself aged forty-five or so, with hair greying at the temples, and fine lines of suffering and thought and gently sarcastic humour about his eyes and mouth, an author of some celebrity—not rich, of course, nor even very successful, but known to and admired by a discerning few. Bertha would still be pretty, petulant, and fascinatingly enigmatic with her curious tortuous motives; there would be several children of varying natures—he pictured them in detail, from their socks to their hair, and gave them names—to whom he would be passionately devoted.

He turned the handle of the door and found, with a jar, that the latch was down. He withdrew one glove and fumbled about inside his coat for the key. It was very cold, and a few thin flakes of snow were drifting mournfully down to the frozen earth.

“You confounded idiot!” observed Eustace to himself, disgusted at his recent flights of fancy. “You aren’t

making up the plot of a sentimental novel, you know. This is real life."

He sighed deeply, entered the house, and proceeded to hang up his hat and mackintosh in the hall. Lizzie put her head out of the dining-room.

"Oh, it *is* you," she said. "We've begun tea. Your fish is in the oven."

She waved him towards the kitchen. Eustace, whom the necessities of a small income had rendered familiar with domestic details, rescued the fish and entered the dining-room with the plate in his hand. Daisy was not there; she had gone away for a few days to stay with a maternal aunt.

"Is there a letter for me?" asked Eustace eagerly.

"No," said Lizzie.

Tea was a silent meal. Eustace really did not know how to begin to tell his news to his mother. The mention of his resignation alone would create a tremendous storm, while as for Bertha! Characteristically he postponed his recital and hoped that a good opening would occur presently.

An hour or so after tea he observed to his sister:

"Are my black shoes clean, Liz?"

"I don't know, but I'll go——" began Lizzie.

"What do you want to know for?" cut in Mrs. Hollins in a disagreeable tone. She was sitting by the fire with her knitting in her hands, unbeautiful as usual in an old-fashioned stuff dress, her coarse, dark hair straying down the back of her neck, her face set and stubborn.

"I'm going out," said Eustace with attempted casualness.

"Where?" snapped Mrs. Hollins.

"To see Bertha West," replied Eustace boldly.

His mother's hands flew above her head in amazement. (Eustace mentally noted that his mother's veneer of gentility was only one generation thick; it came off in flakes at any crisis and revealed the plebeian Yorkshire human beneath.)

"Eh! Well! Nay!" exclaimed Mrs. Hollins, her eyes wide with horrified surprise. "Whatever for?" Receiving no immediate answer to this question, she said in a tone of awe: "You're not going to be engaged to her or anything like that, are you?"

"Well, really, I hardly know," confessed Eustace truthfully. "It looks rather like it—but of course I may be mistaken," he added in haste.

Lizzie, who had left the room before Eustace's alarming announcement, now returned with her brother's best shoes in her hand. He seated himself in an arm-chair by the fire and began to put them on, such being the family custom.

"Mistaken? Mistaken about what?" inquired Mrs. Hollins with a fine scorn. "I suppose you know whether you've been making love to her or not, don't you?"

"I've kissed her, if that's what you mean," blurted out the hapless Eustace, tightening his laces.

His mother sniffed.

"Well, they do say there's a special Providence watches over children and fools," she observed with fierce satisfaction. "And I'm sure you're both child and fool, Eustace, though it's your own mother that says it. That you should have the sense to fall in love with a girl who has money and a position like Bertha West—I never should have expected it of you."

"I didn't expect it myself," murmured Eustace, grimly truthful.

"But of course," said Mrs. Hollins, her hopes suddenly dashed, "Mr. West will never give his consent. You've no money and no prospects. It isn't even as though you were properly qualified for teaching, because you aren't. And then you waste so much time on all that nonsensical writing. You'll have to give up all those silly ideas and buckle to in good earnest if you mean to marry William West's daughter."

At each of these sentences Eustace winced and coloured, and life began to feel intolerable to him. The astounded

Lizzie sat down by the table and gazed at her brother with a fidgety wonder that almost provoked him to a harsh comment.

"Well, it's all to try for," concluded Mrs. Hollins, resuming her knitting and beginning to manipulate her needles with short, excited jerks. "What are you putting your shoes on for? You must change your suit before you go and put on a clean collar."

"Really, mother!" protested the exasperated Eustace, "I'm no longer a child. I'm twenty-five."

"No one would think it," retorted the invincible Mrs. Hollins. "Are you going to see Mr. West to-night?"

"Probably," replied her son, wondering grimly what she would say if she knew the real facts of the case. (It was characteristic of their relations that he never thought of telling them to her.)

"You'll be lucky if he's civil to you," remarked Mrs. Hollins. "What time is she expecting you? Don't go and be late now. Put some water on the gas-stove, Lizzie, and take it up for Eustace in that white enamel jug."

Eustace went upstairs to change his clothes cursing the day he was born. Something must certainly be done with Mrs. Hollins; her present tyranny was really not bearable.

When he descended, washed and brushed, Mrs. Hollins fingered his tie, helped him on with his coat, kissed him, and observed:

"Of course, I shall wait up for you, Eustace, to hear what's happened. But don't hurry away from Beech Lea on that account."

Eustace disentangled himself from her embrace and left the house, slamming the door behind him. Snow was now falling heavily. At another time the large soft flakes, so white within the circles of light cast by the lamps, so grey and dark outside them, would have interested and pleased him. But to-night he groaned and turned up his coat collar bad temperedly. The hideous complications of

the situation overwhelmed him ; the whole thing was so mad and so utterly futilely preposterous that he wished with all his heart that he had never returned from Gallipoli. But that thought by its extreme of cowardice produced a reaction ; he fought his depression and called up his philosophy, and when at length he rang the Beech Lea bell he had managed to arm himself with a manly stoicism.

“ ‘ It’s not life that matters, but the courage you bring to it,’ ” he quoted to himself as he shivered on the doorstep—his overcoat was quite unsuited to the Hudleian winds. “ I’m afraid I don’t feel able to agree with that remark just now. ‘ A philosopher with the toothache.’ Exactly. Is—er—Miss—Mr. West——”

“ This way, please, sir,” said the parlourmaid, who was evidently expecting him.

“ Thank you,” said Eustace, and stepped in.

He was shown into an empty room which seemed to combine the functions of study and breakfast-room. The maid left him, closing the door behind her. Eustace sat down and waited, gazing uneasily round at the unfamiliar furniture, his heart thumping with suspense.

CHAPTER VIII

AN EVENING'S TRAGEDY

1.

MEANWHILE Bertha's path had not been all roses. As she hurried up the Lane after parting from Eustace she was conscious that her shoes were too thin for this snowy weather. It had been terribly cold on the seat in the park, and Bertha felt chilled to the bone; she shivered and drew her furs closer and wondered whether she would escape a cold. The tears overflowed from her eyes and dripped down her cheeks, roughening her soft skin; her fur, too, became damp, and its long hairs clung unpleasantly to her neck. She sniffed and sobbed miserably to herself, and wondered whether after all it would not have been better to hide her humiliation over William Irwell's defection in a bout of pneumonia. But it was too late for that now; she was engaged to Eustace Hollins, and meant to be married before William.

It would not be true to say that Bertha was devoid of affection for Eustace; she liked him and thought him unselfish and good, and she admired his melodious voice, and considered him quite good looking. Also, she was certain that she could get her own way with him, and she meant to manage him into a good position and a large house and a motor-car, and keep him there. At present, however, she was rather glad of his poverty and his "cleverness," because in these respects he formed such an absolute contrast to William. She made up her mind to give her friends the temporary impression that she scorned the glitter of riches and had never dreamed of marrying William—on the contrary, the poor, quiet, generous-souled Eustace was the kind of man she admired.

Somewhat comforted by this idea she entered the house quietly and made her way to her bedroom unseen by anyone. She felt that she must announce her engagement to her family at one fell swoop, for her courage would never survive a succession of angry scenes. Her mother, too, would certainly require an explanation of Bertha's peculiar absence that afternoon, and it would be far simpler to walk into the dining-room while they were all sitting down having tea and divert Mrs. West's attention from that peccadillo by announcing her more startling news.

This plan she carried out in detail. She heard Mrs. West come in uttering bitter complaints: "I can't *think* where Bertha is"; she heard her father's entrance; she heard the parlourmaid below setting the teatable; she heard the sound of the gong—then at last she gathered up her courage and went downstairs and opened the dining-room door.

"Bertha!" exclaimed the family in unison.

"Where *have* you been?" inquired Mrs. West, really angry for once. "I couldn't find you anywhere in town—I waited ever so long in Hollins's—really it's too bad of you, Bertha, it is indeed. I was quite uneasy. If you meant to come home alone, why didn't you say so? Where have you been?"

Bertha conjured up a blush and replied firmly: "I'll tell you later."

She sat down and unrolled her table-napkin with an air of mystery. Mrs. West was silent and gazed at her in indecision. Gladys appeared embarrassed, and Mr. West surveyed his youngest daughter with a look of cold annoyance. There was a pause.

"Father," began Bertha with a pretty timidity—inwardly determined to force the issue—"Eustace Hollins is coming to see you to-night."

"Eustace Hollins?" said her father coldly. "Pray, who is he?"

"You know, love, he's the young man who coaches Bobbie, and he took Bonnie's doll to be mended," explained Mrs. West patiently.

Mr. West scowled. He was not feeling very fond of Bonnie's parents just then. Arthur and Marjorie had not called at Beech Lea since Christmas Day—a whole week ago—and when that morning he had rebuked Marjorie by telephone for the heinous omission she had been insufficiently contrite.

"So sorry, grandpapa," she had said cheerily. "We thought you had had enough of us on Christmas Day. We'll call round to-night after the lecture if you like."

The remembrance of this last phrase irritated Mr. West, and he said with cold indifference :

"Indeed. And what is he coming to see me about?"

"About me," replied Bertha sweetly.

If a bombshell had fallen on the table the family could not have been more horrified.

"About you?" said Mr. West, colouring angrily. "What do you mean? What are you talking about? What has Eustace Hollins or whatever his name is got to do with you?"

"We're engaged to be married," said Bertha, for a brief moment quite enjoying the sensation she was causing.

Her father, provoked out of his usual restraint, struck the table with his clenched fist, making the plates and silver jingle.

"Nonsense!" he roared. "I never heard anything so preposterous in my life. Why, he's never even been to the house. Things aren't done like that."

Bertha stared at him in genuine consternation. In all her scheming she had never thought of the possibility of opposition from her parents. What a fearful position she would be in if her father declined to consent to her engagement! She would be morally bound to Eustace Hollins without deriving the slightest benefit from the tie.

"It's not nonsense, father," she said shakily. "We love each other, and——"

"Where have you met him?" shouted her father.

"Only at Arthur's," said Bertha, beginning to feel frightened.

Mr. West's scowl deepened at this mention of his son's name.

"But, Bertha," objected Mrs. West nervously, "I thought that you and William Irwell——"

"Nonsense!" cried Bertha, in her turn thoroughly roused. "I tell you I'm engaged to Eustace Hollins, and I mean to marry him soon."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," countered her father furiously. "Ring the bell, Mary, and have the meal taken out. We can't eat while this is being settled."

Mrs. West, much flustered, did as she was told, and there was a horrible pause while the alarmed maid came in and removed the tea-things. The family grouped themselves round the fire in constrained attitudes and made commonplace remarks in high, unnatural voices until the maid retired. Bertha thereupon took a seat by the table, as if she felt in need of its protection.

"You must see, Bertha," began Mr. West in a more deliberate and pompous tone, "that this news comes as a great shock to us. We have only met Mr. Hollins once——"

"Twice, father," put in Bertha. "At the concert, you know; you brought him home in the car."

"Twice, then," admitted her father irritably. "But so far as I remember, you didn't seem particularly interested in him then. How long has this affair been going on?"

"Two or three months," said Bertha defiantly.

"But where have you met him during that time?" asked Mr. West, genuinely puzzled. Bertha remained silent with heightened colour; she did not know what reply to make.

"Where did you meet him this afternoon?" asked Mrs. West sharply.

Bertha hesitated; then:

"In the park," she confessed boldly.

Her father's colour rose.

"Don't tell me that you have been meeting this man secretly," he said with disgust.

Bertha was silent, and Mrs. West burst into tears.

"Really I don't know what's the matter with all you children, I'm sure I don't," she wailed. "First Daphne"—Daphne was her second daughter; she had quite literally eloped with her electrical engineer, vanishing mysteriously from Hudley one spring morning—"then Arthur, and now you, Bertha. I thought you had more sense than to get yourself mixed up in an affair like this, Bertha. I did indeed."

"What is the objection to Eustace Hollins, pray?" asked the exasperated Bertha. "He's a gentleman, and he has a better accent than any of my brothers. It's not his fault that he's poor, is it? The war has spoiled his career."

"You should have confided in us before and given us time to think it over," said her father, slightly mollified. "It's impossible to decide an important question like this all in a hurry. You'd better arrange with your mother to have the young man come regularly to the house for a few months, and see whether you like him then as well as you do now. I must say I think your behaviour has been very undignified."

"I don't want to wait months and months," said the unfortunate Bertha. "I want to be engaged to him now." The tears rose to her eyes, and she began to cry. "You'll make me frightfully unhappy, father, if you don't let me be engaged to him now." She sobbed in genuine anguish. "We needn't be *married* for a year or two if only you'll let us be engaged," she wailed, conceding one point to obtain the more important preliminary. She buried her face in her hands and gave herself up to the luxury of expressing in tears all the complicated emotions of the afternoon.

Mr. West rose and paced up and down the room with his hands clasped behind his back. He was upset by

Bertha's tears. In spite of her usual peevish bad temper, she was to him still his little daughter, and he loved her. He remembered her so clearly as a fragile, pretty child whose constant delicacy and frequent illness had sprinkled grey upon her mother's crisp black hair. Many a time in his younger days his first inquiry on reaching home from business had been about his little Bertha, whose thin, undersized body was lying listlessly in bed, her dark, curly head heavy and her childish face flushed with fever. He had a vision of her now as Eustace Hollins's wife, trying to make ends meet on a hopelessly inadequate income, living in a small, dull house and toiling away at rough household duties, her delicate prettiness faded, half a dozen ailing children dragging at her skirts. His heart smote him at the picture, and he fiercely determined never to permit such a preposterous marriage. But then his thoughts took another turn. He did not wish to condemn Bertha to a life of spinsterhood ; that was all very well for the plain, shy Gladys with her lumpy figure and her hair already streaked with grey, but for the fashionable and feminine Bertha it would be one long humiliation. He remembered his own pronouncement that he would rather see Bertha married to a poor man than to the divorced William Irwell, and his conscience accused him of insincerity in that utterance and admonished him that this Hollins affair was a punishment for that sin.

" You know I only want to do what's best for you," he told the weeping Bertha irritably.

" Oh, I never dreamed of your not consenting !" sobbed Bertha. " It's too cruel ! I can't bear it !" She raised her face, swollen and distorted by weeping, to her father and cried in misery : " Oh, it's too cruel of you, father ! How can you be so unkind to me !"

" But, Bertha love," protested the unhappy Mr. West, " it isn't being cruel for me not to consent at once. It's unreasonable of you to expect me to be glad about your engagement to a young man whom I've only seen

once—twice. And with such very poor prospects, too. Do as I suggest: let him come often to the house, and see how you like him when he's in the family circle. If he's a good man and a gentleman and you still love him at the end of six months, of course I'll agree to the engagement. God forbid I should allow a worldly consideration such as money to stand between you and your happiness!"

"If we're not engaged to-night, we never shall be," said Bertha disagreeably, dabbing at her red eyes. She was intensely irritated by her father's misplaced solemnity; he had a trick of becoming religious at critical moments which did his conscience credit but exasperated his children, whose generation was reserved about such matters.

"Had you any suspicion of this affair, Gladys?" demanded Mr. West, pausing in his anxious pacing.

"Well, a little while ago I had," replied Gladys, who had been sitting in trembling silence throughout the scene. "But lately I've thought that I was mistaken; in fact, really I thought that it was somebody quite different."

"How dare you say such things," cried Bertha, hastening to defend her secret hurt from the eyes of the world. "Oh, do let me be engaged to him to-night, father! Do!"

The appeal in her voice was so poignant and intense that Mr. West's balance was shaken, and he insensibly inclined towards doing as his daughter wished. After all, he had enough money and influence to give Eustace Hollins a start in life, if he wished, without hampering his own children. Robert had as much money as his father; Arthur was doing well in a moderate way and was in any case too independent to expect much from his family; while Mrs. West's own private means would suffice to leave a competency to the three girls. There was no longer Fred's career to be considered. Mr. West winced at this thought, and the shadow of his lasting sorrow for the loss of his youngest son passed over him and left him for the moment a truer-hearted and more kindly man.

"What do you think about it, Mary?" he asked, standing still and surveying his wife.

"Nay, it's for you to decide," replied his wife, as she had replied for the last forty years. She shook her head helplessly from side to side and added: "I don't know what to make of it, I'm sure. Bertha's old enough to know her own mind. But I can't fancy her a poor man's wife. Otherwise he seemed a nice enough lad that night at Arthur's, though I should say he's younger than Bertha."

"Of course, it would have to be a very long engagement," said Mr. West thoughtfully.

The crisis was over. The three women perceived that Bertha's engagement to Eustace Hollins was as good as accomplished. There was a pause.

"I'd better tell Annie to light the drawing-room fire," observed the practical Gladys at length, rising to carry out her suggestion.

"Yes, do, love," said Mrs. West gratefully. "And just have a word with her about supper. Tell her to make some extra coffee—does Mr. Hollins take coffee, Bertha?—and we'll have it in at nine, and then the evening won't seem so long. Why, Bertha! You *have* made a mess of your face, crying like that. You'd better go upstairs, love, and tidy yourself up a little."

Bertha, her nerves shattered by the emotional strain of the past few hours, smoothed back her hair with a wandering hand and trailed slowly upstairs. On her way she glanced in at the drawing-room door and saw the parlour-maid on her knees by the hearth, coaxing the fire to burn quickly by means of hand-bellows. The smoke puffed out into the room and made Bertha cough. Going to her room, she tidied her hair and changed her frock with a complete absence of enjoyment. While in the midst of these processes she heard the bell ring and realized with a slight shiver that Eustace had arrived.

Mr. West went into his study and greeted Eustace. Both men were equally embarrassed. Eustace had decided

that, having got himself into this mess, his only decent and honourable course was to see it through to the bitter end, but he rather doubted his histrionic ability to play the part of the devoted lover before Bertha's father. On the other hand, owing to his elder daughter's misbehaviour, Mr. West had had no experience of interviews of this kind, and he resented this lack of experience bitterly.

He plunged at once into the business by saying abruptly :

"Bertha tells me that you love each other."

Eustace blenched, then nerved himself to utter a confirmatory murmur.

"Well, Mr. Hollins, really I hardly know what to say," pursued the perplexed Mr. West. "We knew nothing of the—er—matter until this evening. We hardly know you at all. Of course, you're a friend of my son's. Still—Then again, it seems to me very unlikely that you're in a position to give Bertha the little comforts she's been accustomed to have. No doubt the war has had a bad effect on your career. I really don't know what to say. Bertha seems anxious for an immediate engagement." He paused, and looked at his prospective son-in-law with a worried and expectant air.

Eustace had never in his life before felt such an unutterable cad and such a complete fool. He hoped that Mr. West would forbid an engagement, but even so he would be practically bound to Bertha for some time to come. He felt that lover's rhapsodies were now demanded of him, and he could not possibly provide them. On the other hand, how could he possibly say to Mr. West: "This is all a mistake; I don't want to marry your daughter at all"? No, the hour for extricating himself from the net had passed; it only remained now to pretend that he liked nets. After all, Bertha was very pretty.

"Your objections are all very reasonable, sir," he said firmly, "but if Bertha is ready to overlook the difficulties——"

"Well," said Mr. West with a resigned air, slightly mollified by Eustace's "sir," "I suppose I shall have to let you have your own way. Though I think it's a mistake. Long engagements are a mistake, and marriage on an inadequate income is a mistake. A very serious mistake." He thought of Bertha's tears and added: "But we must see what we can do. Shall we go into the other room?"

Coldly embarrassed, he led the way into the drawing-room; hot and miserable, but nevertheless excited—the adventure, though tragic, was thrilling—Eustace followed him. The West family were sitting nervously round the newly lighted fire, shivering in the chilly atmosphere. Mrs. West was just bidding Gladys fetch her shawl. Bertha, terrified and hardly responsible for her actions, advanced towards Eustace, her teeth chattering with cold and excitement. "I suppose I ought to kiss her," thought Eustace, and he did so. Her cheek was very cold, and she clung to him so convulsively that he felt quite sorry for her and took her hand in his own with an affectionate sympathy. They sat down side by side on a sofa. Eustace folded his arms and then hastily unfolded them again, colouring and wondering whether he had committed a social solecism. He was much impressed by the pale-coloured walls and white paint, the light carpet and heavy silken cushions; he also perceived that Mrs. West and Gladys were more ladylike than his mother and Lizzie. Bertha looked tired and miserable. Quite consciously and deliberately he began to conjure up emotions about Bertha. If she were to be his wife, he might as well enjoy her prettiness. It was not at all difficult to stir himself up into a fever about Bertha's round, white arms which curved along the sofa so dangerously near to him, her pale, oval face, her dreamy eyes enhanced to-night by the dark shadows of fatigue beneath them, her delicious sprinkling of freckles, her slender, drooping body. Responding to the artificial stimulus of emotions created entirely by himself, he began to converse with Mrs. West

in his most melodious voice and his happiest narrative vein. It presently transpired that he had been in the same battalion of the same Yorkshire regiment as Fred West. Fred had been a captain; Eustace, of course, had never risen above the rank of corporal, but the link was there, strong and indubitable. Eustace was prevailed upon to relate Gallipoli experiences, and presently Mrs. West's tears stole down her gentle face, and she espoused Eustace's cause and took him to her heart, and made up her mind that he should have her Bertha however poor he might be. Her husband must get him a good post somewhere. It should not be difficult for him to do so, for Eustace's appearance and speech were quite above the average.

Bertha hardly spoke; she sat with her head tilted back against the top of the couch, mentally and physically exhausted. Her wounded pride, which had hurt her so cruelly since half-past three that afternoon, was now soothed; the sting, the pain of William Irwell's engagement had gone, leaving behind nothing but a dull ache; she yearned for sleep. She was grateful to Eustace and determined that she would be a good wife to him. How fortunate that he had known Fred! The difficulties of the position were smoothed away by that one fact. Presently she fell to thinking of Fred, with whom she had been very intimate; and for the moment she, like her father, was a softer and more gracious person for the thought.

Supper was announced, and the party went into the dining-room. The observant Mrs. West noticed that Eustace's table manners were not, perhaps, quite as good as his other little courtesies; but she concluded that he was one of those naïve, genuine persons whose "company" manners are the same as their everyday ones. In this she was right, but she did not perceive the further truth that Eustace's standard of manners was much higher than her own and that he knew his own deficiencies—and hers—better than she did.

Shortly after supper Bertha's pallor and exhaustion

became so noticeable that Mrs. West, always anxious about her youngest daughter's health, was alarmed.

"I hope you aren't going to have another cold, Bertha," she said apprehensively.

"No, I don't think it's a cold," said Bertha, smiling languidly at Eustace. "But I'm very tired."

"I'd better go," said Eustace, jumping up at once. Bertha certainly looked ill. He remembered with a qualm their long sojourn on the frosty bench in the park. It had been by Bertha's desire, of course, but he in his superior masculine wisdom ought not to have allowed it. "Really, I'd better go."

He looked at Mrs. West in serious inquiry.

"Well, we shall see you to-morrow night, I suppose," said Mrs. West, smiling and nodding at him, but not denying the advisability of his departure.

Eustace made his adieux, kissing Bertha, an action which now seemed quite natural and customary to him. Mr. West accompanied him to the door, offered to lend him an umbrella—the snow was still falling thick and fast—and shook hands with him cordially. Eustace left the house on air, and tramped homewards through the snow without the slightest sensation of cold—his mind was hot with excitement, elation, and tragic misery in varying combinations. He did not know whether an amazing piece of luck had dropped upon him from the heavens, or whether he might as well go and commit suicide at once because his life was ruined. He liked Mrs. West and Gladys—Mr. West was a dark horse—he liked their large pale drawing-room and their pretty china and their purple crocuses growing in bowls. (He did not like Bertha, but he was sorry for her.) Above all he liked to be loved; to be listened to with interest as he had been that night, to be regarded as admirable and interesting and not ridiculous—these were the carefully repressed desires of Eustace's heart. He was shy, and shrank from society, because he felt that society usually despised him and thought him an idiot; but when by chance a new set of

people actually liked him his expansion of soul was wonderful. He thought of the light airy drawing-room, the bright wood fire, the comfortable velvet of the sofa, the gleaming china ornaments, the happy facility of his own conversation, with warm pleasure.

"Why, it might be the beginning of a new life for me!" he thought, and on the instant wondered whether he had not sold his birthright of freedom for a mess of Hudleian pottage. "Not much 'selling' about it!" he reminded himself grimly. "Bertha stole it, and I was fool enough to stand by and say nothing while she did it."

He climbed the steps to his mother's house. The door had been carefully unlatched against his arrival, and the incandescent in the hall was turned on at full. He entered, examined the dining-room and found it dark and cold, and guessed that his mother and Lizzie would be in the kitchen. He walked along the narrow passage and went in reluctantly. Lizzie was stirring something in a pan over the fire; his mother was seated in a wooden arm-chair, knitting. The chequered bright pink cloth over the table, Lizzie's flushed face, the striped teacloths hanging from a rod in front of the fire, and on the dresser a tray containing, as he well knew, the necessities for next morning's breakfast, lent the social amenities at Beech Lea a contrasting momentary pleasantness to Eustace's eyes.

Mrs. Hollins glanced at him sharply, acute suspense in her eyes.

"Well?" she said.

"I'm engaged to Bertha West," Eustace informed her concisely.

Lizzie made a sound of joy from her station by the fire, and Mrs. Hollins seemed positively to expand.

"Children and fools!" she murmured. "Children and fools! Well, Eustace, I congratulate you with all my heart."

"Thank you," said Eustace dryly.

He took off his wet coat and hung it up by the fire. Lizzie advanced to the table and poured the contents of

the pan into three cups which stood in readiness on the table.

"Here's some cocoa for you, Eustace," announced Mrs. Hollins benignly, handing him a cup.

"I don't want any, thanks," replied Eustace.

"It will do you good—it's a cold night—we've got it ready for you on purpose," persisted Mrs. Hollins with the infallibility of doom.

"I don't want it," said Eustace savagely. "I think I'll go straight up to bed—I'm a bit wet." He shut the kitchen door sharply behind him. Halfway along the passage he began to meditate on his mother's lonely life, her straitened means, her disappointment at his own lack of business acumen. "How vilely unkind I am to her!" he thought. "After all, what does it matter whether I like cocoa or not? It's such a trifle—not worth being bad tempered about." He turned and re-entered the kitchen. "I'll have the stuff if you like," he said awkwardly, and stretched out his hand for the cup.

"Ah, I thought you'd change your mind," remarked Mrs. Hollins in her irritatingly infallible manner. She gave him a cup, and stood watching him as he drank the sugary liquid. "Well, your fortune's made now, Eustace, if you only go the right way about it," she told him. "Really?" said Eustace coldly, repenting of his good impulse about the cocoa.

"You'll send in a provisional resignation to the Institute, I suppose, so as to be ready for anything that may turn up," began Mrs. Hollins.

"I sent in my resignation a day or two ago, and saw the Principal about it this afternoon," said Eustace, seizing this opportunity to break the news.

"Really!" said his mother, almost awestruck to find her son behaving with common sense for once, and of course imagining that his affair with Bertha had gradually approached its climax during the past week. "Has Mr. West said anything definite to you yet?"

"About what?" asked Eustace, finishing his cocoa at

a gulp and trying not to distort his features at its repulsive taste.

"Well, of course you'll have to give up teaching and go into a business somewhere," evaded Mrs. Hollins. "You'll have to do if you're going to marry Bertha West, you know. Mr. West will find you a job somewhere, I make no doubt. You'll have to give up all that writing nonsense and buckle to in good earnest, as I told you before."

"I shall never do that, mother," said Eustace, looking steadily at her.

"Never do what?" asked Mrs. Hollins sharply. She knew perfectly well what he meant, and coloured with annoyance at his idiotic obstinacy.

Eustace was silent, and opening the door went out of the room.

"Are you going to bed without telling us any more about it?" asked Mrs. Hollins, aggrieved.

"Yes. Good-night," replied Eustace.

He went upstairs to his room and lighted his candles; he must read something to soothe his mind and put his troubles in their proper light. While rapidly flinging off his clothes he cast an eye over the books which lay about his table. His reading was hopelessly unsystematic, as he himself realized and deplored; and there were always four or five books lying about with scraps of paper projecting from their pages denoting the temporary limit of Eustace's enthusiasms. If he was studying a summary of some subject he often turned aside and perused quantities of books mentioned in the bibliography of the first chapter, and finally returned the original book to the library in a fit of irritation at seeing it lying about unfinished for so long; he also often read several different kinds of books at the same time. Consequently he was never an authority on any one subject, but was always champing the bit on the fringe of many, craving avidly for an advance in different directions at the same time. He frequently drew up excellent schemes for the systematic study of a subject,

and as frequently abandoned them with mournful firmness because they hindered him from learning other things.

Consequently at the present time he had a large selection to choose from. Novels would not suit his mood, for they would inevitably include love scenes which would recall his troubles instead of banishing them; poetry was too personal and sensuous. He picked up the volume of Gibbon he had been perusing when "Lalla Rookh" had lured him from the text, and decided to continue that. He moved his candles to a suitable position, lighted a cigarette, flung himself into bed, carefully arranged his pillows—he was an expert bed reader—and opened the book.

"It was still in the power of Chosroës to obtain a reasonable peace; and he was repeatedly pressed by the messengers of Heraclius to spare the blood of his subjects, and to relieve a humane conqueror from the painful duty of carrying fire and sword through the fairest countries of Asia. But the pride of the Persian had not yet sunk to the level of his fortune; he derived a momentary confidence from the retreat of the emperor; he wept with impotent rage over the ruins of his Assyrian palaces; and disregarded too long the rising murmurs of the nation, who complained that their lives and fortunes were sacrificed to the obstinacy of an old man."

Unfortunate Chosroës!

Eustace's eyes, guided by the clear steady light of history, looked out upon a globe spinning in space, whereon palaces rose in stately beauty to the sky and crashed again to earth in hideous ruin. He perceived the musterings of mighty squadrons, the clash of battles, swift pursuits, the fall of a mighty empire; and Hudley, containing as it did Bertha West and Eustace Hollins and the fret and turmoil of their affairs, sank and dwindled into a mere insignificant black dot on a comparatively barbarous country in the northern hemisphere.

"That," thought Eustace, turning a page, "is the true perspective."

He applied himself steadily to the polished periods and penetrating judgments of the historian.

2.

"You'd better get off to bed at once, Bertha love," urged Mrs. West after Eustace's departure, kissing her daughter. "You look tired out."

"I want to get warm before I go," protested Bertha, drawing a small chair up to the hearth and stretching out her feet towards the blaze. "Wasn't it freezingly cold in this room at first?"

"I'll go and tell them to put a fire in your room," suggested Gladys, and went into the kitchen for the purpose.

Mr. West returned from bidding Eustace farewell, Gladys re-entered the room, and the family clustered round the fire and began to ask Bertha questions which she found so awkward to answer that she was much relieved to hear the front door open.

"Whoever can that be at this time of night?" she exclaimed, glad of the diversion.

"It will be Arthur and Marjorie, I daresay," observed Mr. West without enthusiasm. "They said they would call in on their way home."

It was as he surmised. Arthur shortly put in his head and snowy shoulders and said :

"Hullo, everybody! Beastly night. We're disrobing in the hall so as not to bring in the snow."

He vanished. Marjorie next appeared without her coat, her cheeks bright with the cold air; she kissed everybody dutifully, then sat down on the sofa formerly occupied by Eustace and folded her arms.

"It will be three inches thick by to-morrow morning," said Arthur, re-entering and closing the door. He came to the fire and seated himself with the comfortable assurance of one born in the house. "Sorry we're so late. I thought that old idiot was going on bleating for ever, didn't you, Marjorie?"

"Was the lecture not a good one?" inquired Mr. West formally.

"No, rotten," replied his daughter-in-law with a cheery grin.

"How is baby?" asked Mrs. West, not yet feeling ready to take the plunge and announce Bertha's engagement.

"He's splendid, thanks, and so is Bonnie," replied Marjorie. "I got her off to bed before I came out. I think Emmeline will look after them both all right until we get back." She glanced rather anxiously at the clock.

"'Emmeline!' What an awful name it is! Why don't you call her Mary or Annie, or something sensible," said Bertha scornfully.

"Oh, well, I don't know; after all it's her name," protested Marjorie. "I simply hate being called anything but 'Marjorie,' so I expect she hates anything but 'Emmeline.'"

"I've often wondered," tittered Gladys, glancing shyly out from behind her gold spectacles, "why Arthur always calls you 'Marjorie' instead of a short name, you know."

"Well, now you know," returned Marjorie, colouring and smiling.

"Oh, she has to be humoured, Glad," said Arthur with a twinkle. "You'd be surprised if you knew how carefully I have to humour her."

"Now, Arthur," his mother admonished him, laying her hand affectionately on her daughter-in-law's arm, "we all know who has to be humoured in *your* house, and it certainly isn't Marjorie."

"Thank you, grannie," said Marjorie with a gleeful sparkle. She patted Mrs. West's hand. "At last I have someone to stand up for me."

This little domestic interlude seemed to have created an atmosphere suitable for the announcement of engagements, and Mrs. West said, looking down self-consciously at her ringed hands:

"We've some news for you to-night."

“What, from Beyrout?” inquired Arthur with interest.

“No, oh no,” said Mrs. West, more self-conscious than ever. “It’s Bertha. She’s engaged.”

“Oh, congrats,” said Arthur easily. “And who’s the lucky man?”

“Eustace Hollins,” announced Mrs. West.

“Eustace Hollins!” gasped Arthur. He sat up and stared at his sister. Marjorie also looked thunderstruck. “Why, I didn’t know you knew him.”

“Neither did we,” observed Mr. West a trifle coldly. Freed from the fascination of Bertha’s tears and Eustace’s presence, he had begun to condemn himself for his rash and ill-considered agreement to Bertha’s demands.

“Ah!” said Bertha with a coquettish air. “You don’t know everything, you see.”

Arthur’s face expressed such a horrified amazement that his wife struck in hastily with:

“You forget Bee met him at our house once or twice, Arthur.” She added, with a kindly desire to smooth things over and divert attention from Arthur’s scowl: “There are a great many engagements occurring just now.”

Bertha, who knew what was coming, felt intensely, overwhelmingly grateful to the powers that be and her own scheming abilities for the fact of her engagement. She was a proud and happy girl in love with Eustace Hollins. The idea of a proposal of marriage from William Irwell had never entered her head. Let anyone gainsay it who dared.

“Yes. Ernest Irwell’s for one,” corroborated Arthur sulkily.

“*Ernest?*” cried Bertha on a piercing note of agony. She remembered herself in time to add: “Irwell. Ernest Irwell? To whom?”

“Can you ask, Bertha, after that Christmas Eve party at Denbridge?” said Arthur.

“Of course it’s that fair Miss Lumb,” said Gladys,

much interested. "She sat out with him absolutely every dance."

"I thought at the time there would be an engagement soon in that quarter," came from Mrs. West.

"She's a good deal older than he is—of course it *is* Miss Lumb, as you say," remarked Marjorie. "But I thought she had a good, kindly face, didn't you? I only saw her that one evening at Denbridge, but even *I* noticed that she and Ernest Irwell were rather devoted to each other."

"Why do you say 'even I'?" asked Bertha in a low tone.

"Because Arthur always says I can't see a love affair unless it's put absolutely under my nose," announced Marjorie cheerfully. "I certainly never suspected yours, Bertha."

"Ah! mine," said Bertha.

"Though now I come to think of it," added Marjorie, "I do seem to remember you and Eustace laughing and talking together that night at our house when the pipe had burst."

Bertha wondered how much longer Arthur and Marjorie were going to remain, for if it was long her nerves would certainly give way, and she would scream; perhaps have hysterics. She felt now that if she thought at all she should throw herself back on to her chair and scream and throw her hands about. It was Ernest, then, who was engaged. Not William at all. William was still free, and in love with her. She put one hand to her throat. Her breast rose and fell tumultuously. She must get out of the room or she would choke.

"I think it's an absolutely mad idea," said Arthur, his face clouding. "Bertha and Hollins, I mean. They haven't a single idea or liking in common. Then he's as poor as a mouse, and has no prospects whatever. I don't see Bertha a poor man's wife—she's far too lazy. It will be absolute misery for them both."

Bertha collapsed into heart-rending sobs. She buried her face in her hands and rocked herself backward and forward on her chair. "Really, Arthur!" said Mr. West

furiously, "you're the last person in the world to object to a match on the ground of its unsuitability. You'd better go."

"I can't understand your consenting to such a marriage," returned Arthur angrily, his temper rising. "It will ruin Hollins's life, absolutely ruin it."

"Mr. Hollins's happiness is not my primary concern," shouted Mr. West above Bertha's sobs.

"Bertha will be miserable too," retorted Arthur hotly. "She doesn't care a scrap about books and ideas, and that's all he does care about. Bertha has always been used to basking in luxury and doing exactly what she pleases. I thought she was going to marry William Irwell; he's the man for her, with his half-million."

A staccato scream from Bertha interrupted him.

"Do come away, Arthur," implored Marjorie, dragging at his arm. "You're only making her worse."

"Come and lie down on the couch, love," said the alarmed Mrs. West. She took Bertha's arm, and with Gladys's assistance helped her to the couch. "Gladys, fetch some sal volatile from my bedroom. Arthur, I'm grieved at you, I am indeed. I'll get some water from the other room. William, open a window."

She hurried out of the room. Marjorie succeeded in dragging Arthur into the hall, and there began hastily to put on her outdoor clothes. Arthur's usually good-humoured face was flushed and angry, and his mouth was set in a stubborn line. He had not the slightest affection left in his heart for Bertha; she herself had killed it all long ago. He remembered her covert sneering opposition to his own marriage; he remembered the many slights she had since put upon his beloved Marjorie; he remembered Bonnie's, "I don't like Auntie Bertha"; and he felt an unholy joy in his own brutal speeches. For Bertha's hysterics he had the scorn of a brother. He was also absolutely convinced in his own mind that Bertha did not care twopence for Eustace Hollins, and had inveigled him into a proposal for reasons of her own, though he could not surmise what those reasons were. He helped his wife

into her coat with a silent stubborn politeness, and the pair left the house.

For a few minutes Bertha was alone in the room with her father. When her first uncontrollable burst of emotion had subsided, she raised herself on the couch, still trembling nervously in every limb, and began :

“ I'm so miserable, father.”

“ Don't take the slightest notice of what Arthur says,” said Mr. West, his face hot and angry and his tones loud. “ I never heard such impertinence in my life. My consent has been given and will not be withdrawn ”—to such lengths had his contest with the always rebellious Arthur driven him—“ so don't trouble about it any more. A disgraceful scene, perfectly disgraceful.”

He turned abruptly and opened a window. The curtains billowed out into the room and a gust of cold air made Bertha shiver. Her heart sank at her father's emphatic words. Slowly and shudderingly she raised herself into a sitting position and put her feet in their high-heeled satin shoes to the ground. Sitting thus, her body hunched into an exhausted heap, she passed a wearied hand over her hair and tried to summon up sufficient courage to tell her father that she did not wish to marry Eustace Hollins. A lifetime of habitual concealment of her real feelings prevented the words from rising to her lips.

Mrs. West came in and administered a drink of water.

“ Mother,” began Bertha. “ Arthur—I——” she paused, quite unable to avow her love, her jealousy, and her criminal blunder.

“ You've a perfect right to marry the man you love,” said Mrs. West in a loud excited voice, her cheeks pink with anger. “ Don't take any notice of your brother. How *he* has the audacity to condemn *any* marriage as unsuitable, I can't really tell. You've a perfect right to marry the man you love.”

Theoretically it was so easy to say : “ Yes, but I don't love Eustace Hollins ”; but so difficult in the circumstances ! And if she said the words what a terrible scene remained to be passed through—her mother's exclama-

tions and tearful grief, her father's anger and disgust, her own shame. Her misery, too, would not cease with that day's close; she would be branded for life in the eyes of her honest and upright family as a mean, contemptible coward whose selfishness passed belief. Bertha was quite sure that she did not really deserve all these terrible epithets, but she could quite understand that her conduct might have an unpleasant look to her religious father and sister, and to her kindly mother, and even to the heathen but scrupulously equitable Arthur. Far better leave the whole thing as it was for the present; in any case, she had not the strength for another scene to-night.

Gladys came in with a dose of sal volatile carefully measured out into a medicine glass.

"I don't want it," said Bertha fretfully. "I only want to go to bed."

She rose, and with infinite weariness dragged herself towards the door.

"Are you sure you don't feel faint, love?" asked Mrs. West tenderly.

"Quite sure," replied Bertha in a dead tone.

"I'll come up with you," offered Gladys, and she took her sister's arm to help her flagging steps. Bertha peevishly rejected it, preferring the impersonal support of the banisters. She permitted Gladys, however, to help her undress, watching her sister's large hands fold her own delicate garments with a sense of profound and unavailing irritation.

Arthur and Marjorie were silent till they had left Beech Lea and the Lane behind them. Then Marjorie, whose nerves were still a-jingle from the family disturbance, observed:

"Now you've upset things properly, Arthur."

"I don't care," observed Arthur stubbornly. "I'm sick of Bertha, absolutely sick of her and her colossal selfishness. If Hollins marries her his life will be one long Hades. She's selfish and extravagant and irresponsible and domineering; she's only half-educated; she never reads a book worth calling by the name; she knows

nothing about anything except 'style' and 'smartness'; and her contempt for everyone who doesn't think as she does is nauseating. Hollins has considerable talent, perhaps even genius. What will the menage of such a pair be like?"

"But——" objected Marjorie.

"It will be Hell," concluded Arthur with emphasis.

"But it's so inconsistent of you to talk like this, Arthur," said Marjorie firmly. "Can't you see how inconsistent you are? All these cheerful remarks—utterly unsuited to each other, not the same kind of person at all, no common interests, a wretched life together, etc., etc.—were made by your family on the occasion of your marriage to me. Yet I don't think we *are* particularly wretched, are we?"

"Don't be an ass," Arthur told her, affectionately blunt; "of course they were all wrong about you and me."

"Just so; and you may be wrong about Eustace and Bertha," Marjorie pointed out triumphantly.

"Yes, but what I mean is this," said Arthur with an aggrieved air. "My family said that you and I had no interests in common. Well, we had; it was simply that they didn't know anything about it. Now, Eustace and Bertha—they don't speak the same language. They don't mean the same things by the same words. They can't have any mutual interests. How can they? Consider them and tell me honestly whether you think they have."

"There may be some secret inward niceness about Bertha," contended Marjorie, "that we don't see. She may show it to Eustace."

"Rot!" observed Bertha's brother with the conviction of experience.

"Rot or no rot," argued Marjorie hotly, "Bertha has a perfect right to marry Eustace if she wants to do so."

"And I've a right to my opinion on the matter," maintained Arthur doggedly.

"You needn't have expressed it in such a perfectly horrid way," his wife told him with her customary frankness. "It's glaringly inconsistent of you, Arthur, to

marry in the teeth of your family's opposition and thrive on it, and then expect to arrange Bertha's matrimonial affairs to suit your convenience. Do be reasonable. You might be Bertha yourself from the way you're arguing. How many times haven't I heard you declare that your family has no right whatever to interfere in your affairs? And then you turn round like this and expect to interfere in Bertha's! Be reasonable, I beg."

"Do you think that Hollins will be happy with Bertha?" demanded Arthur.

"I can't say that I do," replied Marjorie thoughtfully. "And I shouldn't think that Bertha is likely to be happy with him. But you needn't have blurted it out in such an objectionable manner, and hinted that Bertha was lazy and mercenary, and goodness knows what else. You resent her criticisms of you fiercely enough, goodness knows."

"Well," observed Arthur in a milder tone, "of course your reasoning is correct and all that. But I am so wearied of Bertha's selfishness. She's the most colossal egoist in all Hudley, and that's saying a good deal. In any case I can't do anything now."

"You might ring up when you reach home and tell her you're sorry," suggested Marjorie.

Arthur swore. In the early days of her married life this habit of his had alarmed Marjorie, but now she was accustomed to it and made no remark. By the time he had finished expressing his opinion of females in general and Bertha in particular they had reached their own front door. Arthur inserted his latchkey and admitted them.

"Look here," he said in a tone of lofty condescension as he removed his coat and muffler and hung them upon the hat stand, "perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to ring up Beech Lea and smooth things over a bit."

"It would be a better idea for you to do it," observed Marjorie, sitting down on the stairs and beginning to remove her snow-covered boots.

"I'm damned if I will," said Arthur briefly, locking the front door.

"Well, I'm damned if *I* will," retorted Marjorie with spirit, smiling but firm. "But you must please yourself, of course; she's your sister, not mine, and I wouldn't dream of interfering in your family affairs."

Considering the line of argument she had recently adopted there seemed to be a suspicion of satire in the last sentence. Arthur took out his pipe and filled it, surveying his wife thoughtfully the while.

"The kind of girl Hollins ought to marry is an intellectual person like you," he told her with a complimentary inflection.

"I have enough to do with one husband, thanks," observed Marjorie, picking up her boots and walking on stockinged feet towards the kitchen. "It's to be hoped," she fired at him from the kitchen door, "that Eustace hasn't such a vocabulary of strong language as you have, or Bertha's hair will turn grey in a week."

"I often weep over your silvery halo," said Arthur, putting down his pipe and turning the telephone's handle. "Hudley 589, please."

Bertha was just about to drag her weary body into bed when the telephone bell rang, and Mrs. West called from downstairs for Gladys. The girl went out of the room and returned immediately to say:

"You're wanted at the telephone, Bertha. Mother thinks you'd better go down."

Bertha's heart beat fast, and her cheeks were suddenly stained pink. She hurried into a dressing-gown and ran downstairs. She did not know exactly what she hoped for, but she felt hopeful; Eustace might have changed his mind, or William Irwell might be masterfully ringing up to say something, Bertha did not know what, which would make the horrible events of the day lose their significance. She took up the receiver with hands trembling from excitement, and said hopefully:

"Yes?"

Arthur's voice said:

"Is that you, Bee?"

"Yes," replied Bertha, her warm hope chilling and dying.

"I say, I'm awfully sorry about what I said this evening," continued Arthur, embarrassed but honest. "I'd no right to upset you like that. Hollins is an awfully decent fellow, and I hope you'll be very happy and all that. Don't let yourself be bullied out of marrying him by anybody if you really want him. Of course he's a great friend of mine, I admire him immensely, so you can rely on Marjorie and myself to stand by you in case there's any trouble—if father should make objections because of his small income, you know, and that sort of thing."

Bertha gave a faint murmur which Arthur very naturally mistook for acquiescence. He desired to know whether his sister had forgiven him, but he was much too proud to ask, sharing also in some slight degree the habitual Hudley reticence of manner. So he merely said lightly :

"Well, bye-bye. The snow's frightfully thick. By the way, I suppose your engagement isn't a secret?"

"A secret?" said Bertha faintly.

"I mean, you don't mind people knowing about it," explained Arthur.

This was exactly what Bertha did "mind" with all her heart and soul, in view of William Irwell's freedom. She was roused to defend her last remaining shred of liberty, and said with despairing emphasis :

"I don't want *anyone* to know about it yet."

"Father will go back on it if you don't make it public," Arthur warned her. "I mean, he'll withdraw his consent."

"Let him!" shrilled Bertha savagely, and was immediately silent, horrified at this near approach to the revelation of her secret.

"Well, all right, I won't mention it," said Arthur awkwardly. "Good-night." He rang off, troubled in mind. Naturally he assumed that the undisguised passion in Bertha's last reply meant that she intended to defy her father if his consent should be withheld. (There was a tradition in the family that Mr. West had withheld his consent once before in the case of Arthur's elder sister

Daphne, and the elopement which resulted had caused a most deplorable scandal.) Arthur thought that the best and most peaceful way of securing Bertha's ultimate marriage was to announce her engagement at once, but he felt bound to respect his sister's wish for secrecy.

He confided his thoughts on the matter to Marjorie.

"You needn't worry about that," she told him. "By to-morrow evening Mrs. Hollins will have told every soul in Hudley that her son is engaged to the rich Miss West."

"Probably she will," said Arthur, his face brightening. "I'm sure I hope so. Bertha may be annoyed at first, but in the long run she'll see that it was for the best."

Bertha trailed slowly towards the stairs. Mrs. West came out of the drawing-room and demanded an account of the conversation. Bertha explained that Arthur had been apologizing for his unkind speeches.

"And quite right too!" exclaimed Mrs. West, her cheeks becoming pink again at the mere thought of Arthur. "Now, love, you go to bed and stay there. We'll bring your breakfast up for you in the morning."

She kissed Bertha tenderly. Gladys, just descending the stairs, did likewise, and Bertha was free to retire to her room.

Bertha climbed into bed and turned out the light, but darkness was terrible and she switched on the lamp again, till presently the light too became terrible and she sought once more the refuge of darkness. Bertha, unlike Eustace, had no books to solace her, no general ideas to take the sting from her private troubles; she simply lay there, physically exhausted, and went through the scenes of the day over and over again in nightmare succession. Last night she was a free woman, a trifle bored by William Irwell's unnecessary delay; to-night she was bound to think of no man save the childish unsatisfying Eustace Hollins. And she herself had wrought this change deliberately, trampling down difficulties with her own will.

"I must have been mad," she told herself. To her that explanation seemed to cover everything, excuse every-

thing ; vaguely she felt that it was unkind, nay, even mean of God to take advantage of her while she was mad and land her in such trouble as this. She could not help having been temporarily mad. Never in her sane religious moments would she have done anything so wicked and fateful as this.

Presently, as she lay there in acute mental torment, she heard the placid customary sounds of Mr. and Mrs. West's retiring. Gladys, too, across the landing, shut her door and made vague dulled noises. To listen, to surmise what actions were indicated by the sounds, soothed Bertha's overburdened brain ; but soon the electric switches clicked off the light, there were a few rustlings and a murmur of conversation, then all was silence and darkness. Bertha turned on her light and sat up, shivering with the cold. She locked her fingers tightly together, and gazed out across the room, seeing alternative series of pictures—first, herself married to Eustace Hollins ; second, herself explaining to her father that she did not wish to marry Eustace, then explaining it to Eustace, then to Arthur, then to any of her friends who might have heard of the affair ; lastly, perhaps, to William Irwell. To the first picture all her feelings cried : “ No ! Impossible ! ” Her courage and her honesty, weak neglected bantlings, could not face the second. For a long time she sat thus, weighing miseries. One misery was already present, the other would require action to precipitate it. Easier not to act, to remain passive merely and let events come as they would.

“ If I could go away ! ” she thought suddenly. “ If I were to tell mother all about it, and go away to-morrow morning ? There would be only one scene to go through. If I were to tell mother to-night ? Then *she* could tell father and the others.”

The outcome of these musings was at length action. Bertha threw back her bed coverings with a hasty jerk, and without pausing to take up a dressing-gown slipped from her room to her parents' door. There her courage failed her. She stood on the doormat, her bare feet

brushed by its black fur, her slender body shaking with cold and anguish. She planned how she would go in and gently wake her mother, and fall upon her knees by the bedside and cry—to soften Mrs. West's heart—and say :

“ I love William Irwell really, and I thought he was engaged, and Eustace Hollins asked me ”—never, of course, would she confess her vile park lurings—“ and so I said yes, but I don't want to really . . . ”

She remained outside the door.

“ I *will* go in, I *will* go in,” she urged her reluctant self fiercely. But she had taught herself for twenty-six years—first, to do nothing unless she had a strong inclination for the proposed action ; and second, never to admit that anything was wrong with her affairs. She stood through many long cold minutes there on the farcical mat ; the clock downstairs struck an hour, she shivered, and on a sudden impulse fled back to her own room and buried herself beneath the bedclothes. The sudden warmth gave her cold body a sense of well-being ; with relief she decided that passivity was easy and admirable. In the morning she would act—plenty of time to take action to-morrow morning.

She fell asleep almost happy because she had contrived to evade the necessity for action.

3.

The girl whom Ernest Irwell had invited to share his wealth was much older than himself, not rich, and no beauty, but she was religious and kind-hearted, and would certainly give the lame Ernest all her treasure of constancy and affection. Most of the ancient families of Denbridge were more or less related to one another—this girl was a very distant connection of the Denbridge Hall Wests, as has already been mentioned. The Principal of the Hudley Municipal Institute was also a Denbridge man, and the future Mrs. Ernest Irwell was his second cousin. The Principal, descending Prince's Road—for he had long ago abandoned his original home at Denbridge as inconvenient

for his work—to keep his appointment with Eustace and attend a later committee meeting, had climbed the tram in which Mr. Irvine, travelling cakewards, clung angrily to a strap. In the old stormy days when Mr. Irvine had sat upon the Town Council and told his fellow-councillors in terms more caustic than wise just what he thought of them, he had been a member of the committee which decided the fates of the Municipal Institute, and he had enjoyed many a fierce argument across the baize-covered table with the Principal, who, of course, belonged to the committee *ex officio*. Mr. Irvine hailed him now with satiric geniality, and asked him biting questions about the Institute's prosperity, which the Principal, himself a man of a fiery temper, which was constantly acerbated by the inferior social position which Hudley accorded him, countered by announcing his "niece's" engagement to a scion of the richest family in Hudley. Mr. Irvine's reception of this news was sarcastic rather than gratulatory—"Are they of a suitable age?" he asked at a venture, and was amused to observe the Principal's flushed embarrassment—and the Principal had left the tram feeling hurt and bruised, and had sought to soothe the tumultuous bitterness of his heart by loftily confiding the news to Eustace, whom he thought it would impress. Eustace, of course, was not at all impressed, but he was too kind-hearted to let this appear, exclaiming instead: "Really!" in a tone of exaggerated deference. "Isn't there another brother?" he continued, pretending to be interested.

"Yes—William. He divorced his wife, you know. Violet Huntley. Pity for so young a man. Shows no sign of remarrying, so far," remarked the Principal, enjoying this man-of-the-world gossip with the pleasant but inefficient Hollins.

By an irony of circumstance, therefore, at the very moment when Bertha's willing cheek offered itself to Eustace's lips, Eustace was aware that William Irwell was a free man.

CHAPTER IX

BERTHA RESIGNS HERSELF

1.

BERTHA was awakened next morning by the entrance of Gladys, who was carrying a lavishly furnished breakfast-tray. She fussed about the room, drawing curtains and finding a wrap for Bertha's shoulders; then inspected the ashes of the fire and decided that an electric radiator would bring warmth more speedily than the long process of cleaning the grate and relighting the fire was likely to do. The bell was rung and a maid commanded to produce the radiator. Finally Gladys sat down on the edge of the bed and beamed steadily at her sister. She looked a little haggard, as though she had spent a wakeful night; perhaps Bertha's engagement had reminded her of episodes in her own life which should have had this happy termination and had somehow failed to attain it. If there were such episodes Bertha was ignorant of them and incredulous of their existence.

"Do you feel quite well?" asked Gladys anxiously. "I was afraid you might have caught a chill."

"I'm quite all right, thank you," replied Bertha in a peevish tone. She sat up and began languidly to break a piece of toast between her fingers, and with this action the horror of her last night's doings descended on her like a cloud. She pushed the plate of food which Gladys had so carefully chosen angrily away. Fancy offering her fish in such a time of mental anguish! She gazed at Gladys in impotent wrath; her sister, who should have been her natural confidante in her present trying circumstances, was so narrow minded, so limited in outlook, that she would never understand the uncontrollable spasm of feel-

ing which had led Bertha into this *impasse*. Were Bertha to relate now the inner history of yesterday's events, Gladys's dull eyes would open wide with horror, her long face would be contorted with disgust; her condemnation of Bertha's actions would be unsparing; whereas Bertha felt sure that the affair was not really her fault; she had been the miserable victim of—something, she was not quite sure what; fate, perhaps, or Mr. Irvine; at any rate, circumstances had been too strong for her.

"Who is mother telephoning to?" asked Bertha irritably, as the sounds of the high, strained voice which Mrs. West considered necessary at that tiresome instrument floated up through the study's open doorway.

"Aunt West," Gladys replied. "She rang up about some meeting or other, and mother was telling her about your engagement when I came up."

"Did she seem surprised?" asked Bertha faintly.

"Yes, she did seem rather surprised," said Gladys, averting her head. She continued, nervously fingering the frill of the eiderdown: "I was rather surprised myself."

This was a Heaven-sent opportunity for Bertha's avowal, but the girl was occupied in straining her ears to catch her mother's phrases.

"Oh, no, it's not a secret," she heard.

To her horrified imagination it seemed as if her engagement to Eustace Hollins were being shouted from the house-tops. Everyone in Hudley would hear of it before the morning was over. Impossible to retract her pledge before the eyes of the Hudleian world, and be pointed at as the girl who did not know her own mind for two days together; not to mention the terrible probability that William Irwell would not care to have anything to do with the subject of such a tremendous scandal. Impossible to do anything but let things drift and hope for the best.

It was indeed impossible; for, as Marjorie West had prophesied, Mrs. Hollins was already finding means to publish abroad the astounding fact of Eustace's engage-

ment. The news spread rapidly throughout the many different circles to whom the West name was familiar. It did not, however, reach William Irwell, for he had left Hudley by an early train on a visit to his London office.

Her breakfast over, Bertha rose and dressed languidly, and was then, with Gladys, sent off to town to meet Isabel by Mrs. West, who wished the family to display a dignified unity with regard to an event about which she guessed there would be much comment and speculation. She herself remained at home to receive the expected visit of Mrs. Hollins, which was duly paid.

To Bertha the morning was a gradually deepening nightmare. She met her first congratulators with a bright smile and a well-managed blush, but as the hours went on the tragic intensity of her position wrought upon her nerves and made her pale, drew black lines beneath her eyes, and rendered her physically incapable of an upright carriage and a smiling countenance. Isabel told her frankly that she did not look like a newly betrothed girl at all, and Gladys whispered anxiously in her ear :

“Do cheer up, Bertha, or people will think there’s something strange about it.”

Bertha tried desperately to look coy and cheerful, and was so exhausted by the effort that she jumped at the slightest sound, was terrified of the traffic when crossing a street, and compelled the reluctant Gladys to accompany her home on a tram, saying that she was too tired to walk the short distance from town to the Lane. Once in the tram, she sank into a corner with an exhausted air and pulled her furs about her. Gladys, who knew only too well her sister’s lack of vitality, mentally diagnosed a forthcoming bout of influenza, and decided to investigate Bertha’s temperature. As soon as the two girls reached Beech Lea, Gladys entered her mother’s bedroom in search of a thermometer. Mrs. West was standing before the dressing-table, arranging her short grey hair. Gladys indicated her errand.

“Dear me !” said Mrs. West, a line of worry appearing

on her forehead, "I hope she isn't going to be ill. The thermometer's in that drawer. Mrs. Hollins wants her to go there for tea and the evening to-day. I thought she would have asked your father and myself as well, but she didn't mention it."

"What was Mrs. Hollins like?" inquired Gladys, searching diligently for the thermometer amid the orderly débris of the drawer.

"A little hard, I thought her," said Mrs. West dubiously. "Not like Eustace at all. I rather liked him, didn't you?"

"*Very* much," said Gladys enthusiastically. "He seemed so kind and gentle, and spoke so nicely about his younger sister."

"Yes, I think he's really a nice kind boy," admitted Mrs. West, who was suffering a slight reaction from her last night's enthusiasms. "But whether Bertha will be happy with him or not is a different matter; he seemed so young and unsettled somehow. But Bertha is so wilful and so naughty when she can't have her own way that I really think it's best to let her have her head. Your father agrees with me."

Gladys listened with serious interest to her mother's confidences, and then went off to take the reluctant Bertha's temperature, which proved to be but very slightly above the normal. As Mr. West was absent in Leeds on municipal business, the three women then proceeded to an unsubstantial feminine lunch, after which Bertha was carefully tucked up on the dining-room couch in front of the fire and commanded to sleep.

"All this excitement has been too much for you, love," repeated Mrs. West for the twentieth time. "Now you just have a nice quiet sleep. I'll tell the girl to bring you in a cup of tea at four, and then you'll have plenty of time to dress before Eustace comes to fetch you. He won't be here before five, I should think."

Bertha made a great effort to compose her mind; she concentrated her thoughts on the fact that she was going

to marry Eustace Hollins, and told herself that she might as well make the best of it. The image of William Irwell faded gradually from her mind, and she dozed, only to wake abruptly to the grinding torture of the knowledge that her life was spoiled by her own idiotic act. Unable to remain inactive any longer, she crept quietly upstairs—Mrs. West and Gladys were comfortably asleep in the study—and changed her frock, then descended in time to hear the comfortable platitudes delivered by Annie as she brought in the tea. It was not Annie's duty to bring in the tea, but she had been with the family for more than thirty years, and it was quite impossible to prevent her doing anything and everything she wished. She had already told the parlourmaid quite firmly that she intended to answer all the rings at the front door that afternoon, in order to get a good view of "Miss Bertha's young man" when he should arrive.

Bertha finished her tea and sat gazing into the fire, pitying herself intensely and thinking how happy she would be if only she were thus waiting for William Irwell instead of Eustace.

In spite of her misery, she had a pleasurable moment when Annie opened the door and announced "Mr. Hollins" in a ceremonial voice. It was certainly piquant to be engaged at last, after all those years of spinsterhood, even if it were the wrong man who awaited her across the hall. She rose, looked in the mirror, patted her hair, and swept into the drawing-room with a pleasant sense of being the personage of the moment.

Eustace, standing on the light fur rug, with his back to the fire, was a surprise to her. His pleasant face, now hot with embarrassment, was better looking than her memory of it, but his clothes were much worse; his blue suit was very shiny in the cold afternoon light—the snow outside cast a white glare through the window—and he had a youthful, childish look which unexpectedly struck a painful chord in Bertha's heart. She advanced with a nervous smile; Eustace kissed her awkwardly near

one ear. They sat down on the couch side by side. Neither of them had the slightest idea how to proceed.

"I've brought these," Eustace managed to stammer out, and he awkwardly produced three diamond rings, each in a cubical blue velvet box of its own, "for you to choose from."

Needless to say, this idea of the engagement rings was not his own; he had been urged into selecting them that morning by Mrs. Hollins, whose sixth sense warned her that the betrothal was insecure and uncertain of consummation.

Bertha's heart sank as she selected the most expensive of the three. It was such a wretched little ring, its diamond so niggardly; she owned more than one ring given her on different birthdays by mere members of the family which far surpassed this betrothal offering which Eustace was now putting upon her finger. Daisy, who had returned home that morning, had assured him that this ceremony was indispensable and had instructed him how to perform it. He thought he was now doing it rather well, but to Bertha his naïveté was as awkward and unpleasant as the ingenuous questions of a child sometimes are to its elders. She withdrew her hand in very unloving fashion and said ungraciously:

"I suppose I had better go and get ready." She rose, and, to modify the coldness of her last sentence, observed gushingly: "Is it *very* cold outside?"

Eustace, who was always immensely interested in the weather as weather, replied in detail, which bored Bertha and kept the pair standing in awkward suspense for a minute or two.

"Arthur and Marjorie will be coming in later in the evening," concluded Eustace irrelevantly.

On her way up to her room Bertha went into the study; Mrs. West and Gladys were now awake and placidly sewing.

"Look, mother!" she said, extending her left hand.

“Very pretty, love,” replied Mrs. West with a worried air.

The setting of the diamond was tasteful, as was to be expected since Eustace had chosen it, but to the most casual eye the ring did not appear one likely to please the luxury-loving Bertha West.

“Has—er—Eustace come?” continued Mrs. West, shrinking a little from the unfamiliar name.

Bertha winced at it. What a name, what a ridiculous, un-Hudleian, un-Yorkshire first name! “Eustace Hollins.” How preposterous was the descent from the too romantic “Eustace” to the prosaic “Hollins”! “Bertha Hollins.” Ugh! Impossible!

“Mind you wrap up well, love,” Mrs. West cautioned her. “It looks very cold outside.”

“So Eustace says,” said Bertha with an unpleasant intonation. Inwardly she was saying: “It’s impossible. I won’t do it. I don’t care what father or mother or Arthur or all Hudley says; I will not do it.”

She went upstairs and flung on her hat and coat in very un-Bertha-like fashion; then by force of habit began to arrange her hair becomingly round her pale face.

“Why ever I was such an idiot as to let it go on, I can’t imagine,” she told herself angrily. “It’s out of the question. Of course, I can’t keep his ring.” She looked at the poor jewel angrily; she was always very particular about her monetary obligations, the more so, perhaps, because she did not admit any other kind. It infuriated her to think that she bore upon her finger some sixteen pounds of Eustace Hollins’s money. “I shall get hold of Arthur to-night and explain it to him and make *him* tell father and the Hollinses for me. Of course, I know there’s no great love lost between Arthur and me, but he’ll do *that* for me. He’ll feel obliged to do it if I ask him. I must do it *to-night*, so that Eustace—ugh!—can send the ring back at once.”

She descended to Eustace—to whom Mrs. West was

now uttering motherly platitudes—and informed him in a fiercely distant manner that she was ready to start; and the two left the house immediately.

2.

The Hollins family had spent the day in a state of convulsive excitement. Several rooms were “turned out” and thoroughly cleaned by a charwoman hastily summoned for the occasion; Mrs. Hollins took out from her cupboards her best china and her best silver and her best linen, in order to entertain her future daughter-in-law in a becoming manner; Lizzie washed the china and discussed antimacassars with her mother; and Daisy, bright-eyed and eager, went into Hudley and bought luxuries with a lavish hand, returning laden with parcels, her accounts hopelessly muddled. (Eustace meanwhile visited the jeweller’s.) At the midday meal Mrs. Hollins created a scene because Daisy had spent sixpence more on flowers than she had been authorized to do; Daisy cried with childish vehemence, and had to be soothed by Eustace, who privately considered the course of events nightmarish. The meal over, Eustace was driven out of the dining-room, in order that the table might be set for tea; by three o’clock the best china sumptuously decorated the best tablecloth, and Daisy’s flowers were universally admitted to lend the table a wealthy air. When Eustace left the house to fetch Bertha, Mrs. Hollins and Daisy were engaged in a hot controversy as to what clothes they should wear for the occasion, while Lizzie, her face flushed, her spectacles steamed, anxiously superintended in the kitchen the cooking of a roast fowl.

“I shouldn’t wear anything *very* elaborate,” mildly hinted Eustace from the doorstep. He had his own ideas of what constituted the ladylike.

“People never think the worse of you for having good clothes,” Mrs. Hollins tartly informed him; and to her credit it must be said that she understood the West

attitude better than did Eustace, who judged the family from the exceptional Arthur.

The newly engaged couple turned into Derwent Terrace and approached Mrs. Hollins's abode. Eustace became painfully aware that his mother's house was the only one in the dingy row which boasted no window-box for holding flowers, but hoped that as it was winter the deficiency was not too apparent. Bertha, not being interested in flowers, did not observe this detail, but she did observe the newly scoured steps, the railings recently painted a cheap shade of green, the clean curtains, the conventional aspidistra in the window on the conventional small table, the well-polished brass fittings of the door, and augured from these things quite correctly that Mrs. Hollins—of whose face and form she had but a dim remembrance, though she was familiar with the outlines of Eustace's family history—was a rather vulgar, managing person who might prove difficult to handle either as a prospective mother-in-law or as the mother of a jilted suitor. They ascended the steps, Bertha surveying with distaste some depressed and stunted bushes on the right, from the leaves of which the fast-melting snow slid with a dismal squelch into the pock-marked, greyish snow on the earth beneath. Meanwhile Eustace wondered in an agony of uncertainty whether to ring the bell or to walk straight in. To ring the bell seemed mere affectation, yet Eustace doubted the propriety of walking casually into the narrow, dingy hall with its dismal oilcloth, its "runner" of carpet inadequately broad and much worn at the far end, its depressing paper, its huge mahogany hat stand with branching arms usually draped with homely coats but to-day naked for the occasion.

"Not," he thought, "that I mind the decorations being *cheap*, but they're so unnecessarily hideous."

His perplexities were resolved by Lizzie's opening of the door. Lizzie was prepared to adore Bertha. Her romantic mind, debarred from exercising its imaginative enthusiasm upon her own affairs, had eagerly seized the

opportunity offered by Eustace's engagement; Lizzie imagined that Bertha was a sweet, gentle, kindly little soul, deeply in love with Eustace and willing to suffer inconveniences cheerfully for his sake; rather simple, perhaps, easily moved to tears, and not able to hold her own against Mrs. Hollins, plump and ingenuous, but thoroughly good and faithful. This fancy portrait was a not unreasonable one on Lizzie's part. She had met Mrs. West and Gladys at chapel functions, and had been struck by their genuine kindness; Mr. West she did not know personally, but he had the reputation of being a strictly religious man; Arthur she worshipped for his geniality and his kindness to Eustace. So that very naturally she assumed that Bertha was a younger and prettier edition of Gladys. Her tired face, still flushed from her culinary exertions, brightened into a loving smile of welcome.

"Come in," she said affectionately, stepping back into the hall and gazing at Bertha with whole-hearted admiration.

Bertha had a qualm. She reluctantly realized that Eustace and Lizzie—silly, affectionate, sensitive creatures—were bound to get hurt in the development of events, whatever might be the ultimate issue. Why had she put herself into this odious position of being obliged to hurt people who had never done her any harm? If only William Irwell had hastened his slow pursuit; if only her father and mother were easier to confide in; if only her Uncle Dick had been less vindictive or more accurate; if she herself had not happened to meet Eustace, all would now be well. What a horrid concatenation of events had forced her, the usually gentle and kind-hearted Bertha—she really thought of herself like that—to perform such an uncandid—to say the least of it—action! She followed Lizzie upstairs and into Mrs. Hollins's bedroom, now resplendent with embroidered pillow-cases, sheet shams, and bedspread. Bertha appreciated the embroidery, but the room itself seemed so dark and gloomy, its corners left untouched by the weak light of the noisy incandescent,

that she could have wept from sheer depression. On the mantelpiece stood an unframed photograph of Eustace in khaki, looking as hideous as a badly-fitting private's uniform and a village photographer combined can make a man with an unwarlike face. Bertha winced and averted her eyes. What attitude should she adopt towards the mother and sisters of this man to whom she did not intend to remain engaged one minute longer than she could help? A timid unhappy look, she thought, as she arranged her hair before the gloomy mirror, would best become her present situation. She hoped that Arthur would arrive soon.

"Eustace said," she began to Lizzie, who stood by, all admiration, "that my brother and his wife were coming in?"

Lizzie coloured; there had been a dispute on this point amongst the family. Eustace desired to invite Arthur and Marjorie to tea; Mrs. Hollins did not wish to invite them at all, partly because of the expense—another chicken would have to be provided—and partly because of her inveterate dislike to Marjorie. Daisy had suggested the compromise of asking them informally to come in at eight o'clock or so, and after much wrangling this had been decided upon.

"They're coming in at eight," said Lizzie hesitatingly, conscious of reserve.

At eight! Bertha's heart sank; how could she pass through two hours and a half without hopelessly committing herself? She gave a last pat to her frock, which was quite sumptuous enough to justify Mrs. Hollins's best black silk, and followed Lizzie down the narrow stairs into the drawing-room, where Eustace and his mother and Daisy stood in varying degrees of nervousness.

Mrs. Hollins swept forward, took Bertha's hands firmly in her own, and kissed her cheek with maternal fervour. The two women instantly disliked each other, and Bertha's spirits rose.

"She's managing and selfish—Eustace can't call his soul his own," thought Bertha.

“She’s managing and selfish—Eustace will never be master in his own house,” thought Mrs. Hollins with a pang. Aloud she said: “How cold you are, love! Come near the fire. Eustace!”—her voice was sharpened by her very concern for him—“draw up that arm-chair for Bertha.”

Eustace started, and in a flurry began clumsily to move the chair. Mrs. Hollins coloured with impatience at his awkward movements; Bertha, therefore, smiled prettily at Eustace and said “Thank you” in an endearing tone. Almost at once Lizzie, who had disappeared a minute or two ago, came in and announced that tea was ready. The party proceeded into the dining-room, Mrs. Hollins leaning heavily on Eustace’s arm—a thing she did not do once in a twelvemonth. She did not exactly consciously desire to show Bertha her power over Eustace, but she would have found it difficult to explain wherein her feeling differed from such a desire. Lizzie, whose apprehensions had somehow been awakened by the meticulous care with which Bertha examined her appearance in front of the bedroom mirror, observed the girl anxiously as they entered the room, and, although Bertha kept her expression well under control, Lizzie knew at once that the table appointments were not such as would be considered acceptable at Beech Lea. She winced, and forebodings came to her.

Tea was not a success. Bertha was accustomed to being waited on by a parlourmaid, and the Hollinses kept no maid; Lizzie was nervous, sniffed and fidgeted and jumped zealously up and down, moving plates, and Daisy was unaccountably tongue-tied; Mrs. Hollins’s irritation grew, and the misery of Eustace was profound.

“Take Bertha’s *plate*, Eustace,” urged Mrs. Hollins in an exasperated undertone. Eustace jumped up nervously, colouring.

“Oh, *please* don’t trouble,” commanded Bertha so sharply that Eustace flushed a shade deeper and sat down again.

Between the caprices of the two women—neither of

whom he loved—his position was distressing. Lizzie marked this and sorrowed.

“Will you take anything more, love?” asked Mrs. Hollins at length.

“No, thank you,” replied Bertha with a sweet smile which somehow acidly conveyed that she considered Mrs. Hollins’s phrase antiquated and undesirably plebeian. “She needn’t imagine,” thought Bertha defiantly to herself, “that she’s going to drag Eustace and myself down to this level when we’re married, because she isn’t.”

The four went into the drawing-room, Lizzie remaining behind to clear away the tea things. Bertha began to talk to Eustace about his sojourn in Marseilles, and guessing by subtle indications that Mrs. Hollins did not like this theme pursued it. Eustace was, therefore, comparatively happy when Lizzie entered the room.

The conversation paused, and did not restart itself. Bertha looked round the room for inspiration, but found none in the heavy upholstered furniture, the crude cushions, the elaborate gilt clock under a glass shade, the photographs, or the bowl of flowers which Lizzie had brought in with her from the other room. Finally her gaze lighted upon the piano; she remembered Eustace’s musical—what was it? Something to do with a newspaper—at the Choral Concert, and asked in an intimate tone:

“Do you play a *great* deal, Eustace?”

“Indeed he does,” replied Mrs. Hollins. “And always wasting his money on music, too. You’ll have to try to make him more economical, Bertha.”

“More likely make him earn more money,” thought Bertha. “She might let him speak for himself, really! It would be a good deed to take him away from her, it would indeed.” She turned to Eustace with an expectant look, to indicate that it was his answer she wanted and not his mother’s. This was not lost on Mrs. Hollins.

Eustace discoursed pleasantly on music.

“I don’t buy a *very* great deal of music, you know,” he said deprecatingly. “In fact, hardly any; it’s chiefly books I buy. But of course sometimes—for instance, last

week I bought a book of folk-songs—I expect that is what's in mother's mind."

"Oh, do you sing?" inquired Bertha with interest.

"Oh, *no*," said Mrs. Hollins hastily. "Of course he doesn't. He just tries these folk-songs over for the tune, that's all."

"I wish you'd sing one to *me*," begged Bertha plaintively, inspired by the demon of contradiction.

"Oh, no, I couldn't really," protested Eustace, perspiring with nervousness. "What mother says is true, really; I don't sing."

Bertha's pretty face hardened at this failure.

"I think you might, to please me," she said with an assumed dainty imperiousness, putting one hand on the arm of his chair.

The unfortunate Eustace rose and attempted to sing a folk-song. He made a fool of himself, and every person in the room knew it. Lizzie went out on an invented errand because she could not bear to see his look of misery; Mrs. Hollins's dark stubborn face moved not a jot, but she suffered, and Bertha felt that the real victory of the battle did not lie with her, and yearned for another trial of strength.

Things were in this posture when Arthur and Marjorie arrived. Eustace brightened up at once; Bertha was bored by the interruption—she had completely forgotten, in the excitement of her fight with Mrs. Hollins, her determination to return Eustace his ring that night and cease her engagement to him. The weakness of Lizzie and Eustace roused qualms in her conscience, but Mrs. Hollins's hard infallibility had made her regard her marriage to Eustace as a duty—possibly a pleasant duty—and not as a crime.

Arthur, big, broad, genial, good looking, seemed to bring a breath of fresh air into the room. Marjorie, who had paused in the hall to speak to Lizzie, entered last, in the floppy blue garment which Bertha detested. Her bright, eager face looked tired, but, as always, intensely interested in everything that went on.

“Well,” said Eustace, shaking hands with her, “and how is Francis Arthur?”

Bertha stared at him, not understanding, and it took her several minutes to remember that Francis and Arthur were the baptismal names of her latest nephew.

“Don’t ask, my dear fellow,” said Arthur, sinking on to a couch. “We were awake all last night with him, weren’t we, Marjorie?”

“We were,” admitted Marjorie, submitting to Mrs. Hollins’s embrace.

“I paced the floor——” began Arthur in a melodramatic tone.

“Nonsense, Arthur, you did nothing of the kind,” said his wife firmly, but with a twinkle in her eye.

Arthur, however, insisted on giving his version of the night’s proceedings. His account was amusing, and the Hollins family looked a little brighter as long as the topic lasted. Presently, however, it was worn out, and there was an awkward pause. Arthur heartily disliked Mrs. Hollins because he suspected her of criticizing Marjorie and bullying Eustace; Marjorie always felt awkward in Bertha’s presence, and just now she ardently desired to sleep, for she had been awake most of the night with her small son, and had put in a good twelve hours’ hard work since rising that morning; so that neither of the pair were much inclined to talk.

“Were you surprised when you heard of the engagement?” Mrs. Hollins asked Marjorie, with an arch air.

“Yes, I was, very,” admitted Marjorie frankly.

Bertha’s colour rose.

“I suppose she thinks he couldn’t fall in love with me because I’m not clever like her,” she thought angrily, and she determined to show her sister-in-law that she was mistaken.

She began a definite campaign of “showing her power” over Eustace; at her command he opened and shut the window, moved his chair and her own, told her things which he knew she did not really want to hear, and so on. Bertha remembered how once some years

ago, before Robert was married, she and her brother and Isabel were lunching together in a café somewhere, and Isabel had begged Robert to "request" the orchestra to play some silly piece she desired to hear. Robert, who approved neither of the orchestra nor of the song, had been reluctant, but he had complied; Isabel had triumphed in, and Bertha had felt deeply humiliated by, his compliance. Now she felt that she would like to do something like that to Eustace, "just to show" Marjorie and Mrs. Hollins. (This reflection, however, did not make her feel any kindlier towards Isabel.) Eustace's hot and nervous humiliation, obliged as he was by his sex to comply with the outrageous caprices of Bertha and his mother—for Mrs. Hollins, not to be outdone, started an opposition campaign—was distressing to behold. Lizzie, always incoherent, became almost incomprehensible with misery; and Marjorie, who was very sensitive to hostility in the atmosphere, woke up and tried her best to smooth things over and tease Bertha into a more sensible mood. She telegraphed to Arthur the need for geniality, and he exerted himself to be jocular.

This jocularitas had unfortunate results. Daisy's customary manner varied between the extremes of reserve and volubility; she either sat silent, looking about the room with scared, pathetic eyes, too nervous to utter a word, or she talked at the top of her voice without ceasing, gesticulating freely, telling funny stories and then gazing avidly round for applause. The golden mean of quiet conversation was impossible to her. So far that evening she had not said a word, but she was always apt to be too free and lively with men, and Arthur's entrance had excited her. Now his fraternally bantering sentences set her going; she suddenly began to giggle and talk coquettishly in a loud voice, and indicated the size of every article she mentioned with her hands, spreading out her rather pretty fingers—long and slender like her brother's—with coy glances towards Arthur. When addressing him she hesitated in an obvious, gushing manner between "Mr. West" and

“Arthur,” and compromised on “Mr. Arthur,” which made Eustace feel quite sick. Arthur did not know what to do with her; if he continued his gentle banter, she rose to terrific heights of archness, but there was a pathetic naïveté about her—strangely reminiscent of Eustace—which made it impossible for him to say anything rude or snubbing to her; he simply could not do it. His pleasant, fresh face turned red, and he glanced appealingly towards Marjorie. Bertha coloured and stiffened and thought: “Disgusting little idiot!”—though the difference between her own tactics and Daisy’s was merely one of degree.

The poor child herself was enjoying her own fluency immensely, and thought it horrid of her mother to look so glum when she was getting on so nicely, especially as Mrs. Hollins frequently scolded her for what she called her “sulky” silences.

“Aren’t they a perfectly awful family?” thought Bertha. “Look at Lizzie in that plaid silk blouse, wrinkling up her nose and sniffing! And Daisy! And Mrs. Hollins and her horrid black hair straggling down her neck! Decidedly Eustace and I will not live anywhere near Derwent Terrace.”

Supper proved a welcome diversion, and as soon after this meal as she decently could, Marjorie rose and began those lengthy ceremonies which Mrs. Hollins considered necessary before a visitor could depart. Mrs. Hollins excused herself from attending the two girls into the bedroom on the score of her gout; Lizzie took her place. Once upstairs, Marjorie, who was really extremely tired and had found it difficult for the last hour to sit up straight and make polite conversation, hurried into her unfashionable coat, pulled on her hat, and leant wearily against the bottom of the bed to wait until Bertha’s preparations should be complete. As Bertha stood in front of the dressing-table, pulling her pretty hair down over her ears and adjusting her hat to the correct angle, Marjorie felt such a wave of aversion for her sister-in-law sweep over

her that she was ashamed of her own uncharitableness, and determined to be extra sisterly to atone for it.

"Would you care to go to a lecture instead of me to-morrow night with Arthur?" she said. "Eustace often goes to this series, and I'm so busy just now. We have tickets for the whole course."

Bertha's glance over her shoulder was one of scorn. It said as plainly as words could: "You think I ought to try to be 'clever' if I am to keep Eustace's love, but for me with my prettiness it is quite unnecessary, I assure you. This modern notion of being the 'intellectual equal' of your husband is the resource of the plain woman; I don't need it." Bertha could not thus have analyzed her thoughts, but she felt a confused scorn and irritation, and said coldly: "No, thanks; I don't think I will."

Marjorie coloured, and her strained patience snapped. She felt inclined to prophesy evil things concerning Eustace and Bertha, as Arthur had done on the previous evening, and to avoid this she turned abruptly and left the room.

"I'll go down and wait in the hall, Lizzie," she said over her shoulder.

Lizzie silently helped Bertha on with her coat. Marjorie descended the stairs in time to hear Mrs. Hollins observe in an exasperated undertone:

"Put your coat on at once, Eustace; don't keep Bertha waiting. Of course you must take her home to Beech Lea."

Eustace complied with guilty haste.

"Isn't Bertha ready *yet*?" asked Arthur crossly, thinking how tired his wife looked and how extremely inconsiderate it was of Bertha, who never did a stroke of work in her life, to keep her standing about like this while she "titivated" her hair.

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied Marjorie wearily. Then she mentally scolded herself for her impatience—after all it was not Bertha's fault that baby had kept *her* awake all night, and Marjorie was nothing if not logical. "I don't think she'll be long now," she added with an attempt at brightness.

But Arthur was not deceived.

"I don't know that we need wait for her," he said firmly. "She has Eustace to take her home. You look dead tired, Marjorie. It's to be hoped Francis Arthur won't howl all this night as he did last."

"Oh, don't suggest it!" pleaded Marjorie in such a hollow tone that Mrs. Hollins felt obliged to say:

"You'd better get home to bed, Mrs. Arthur; there isn't the slightest need for you to wait for Bertha. Eustace ought to know the way to Beech Lea by this time."

Arthur privately doubted whether Eustace had much cause to know the way to Beech Lea as yet, but he bade Mrs. Hollins a grateful farewell, and observed kindly to Daisy:

"You must get my sister to take you to some of her dances, Miss Hollins," which remark, as he had hoped, had the effect of smoothing over Daisy's unfortunate pre-supper behaviour.

The door closed behind Arthur and his wife just as Bertha descended the stairs. There were lengthy kissings and farewells.

"Where's Arthur?" inquired Bertha presently.

"They left some minutes ago," replied Eustace.

"Oh, Eustace!" said Bertha fretfully. "Why did you let him go? I particularly wanted to speak to Arthur."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Eustace, colouring under this rebuke. "Shall I run on and give him a message? I dare say I could catch him."

"Oh no, it doesn't matter," said Bertha hastily—it was impossible to employ Eustace on the errand of breaking her engagement with him. "Shall we go now?"

Eustace signified his readiness; the door was opened and the streets were discovered to be almost clear of snow, a circumstance which cheered Bertha greatly. As they descended the steps Bertha, feeling almost cheerful, decided that it was no use fighting against Fate—she was evidently destined to marry Eustace Hollins, and marry

him she would. Her conscience had a twinge at this too sudden change of mind.

"Well, but I haven't had a *chance* of speaking to Arthur!" she defended herself. "Not a single chance. And it's too late now that I've got Eustace's ring and been there to tea and everything. Of course it's a pity about William Irwell, but it's his own fault, and after all he is a divorced man, and father doesn't like him."

She prattled affectionately to Eustace:

"I think Daisy is rather like you to look at, Eustace. I'm going to Bradford to-morrow to buy some new shoes."

"What's the matter with those you had to-night?" asked Eustace, meaning to be complimentary.

"Oh, but they're to match a special frock," explained Bertha. "Will you come with me? You could get off business for once. Oh, it's your holidays. How funny! I expect I shall get used to it in time."

"What train do you propose travelling by?" murmured Eustace in uneven tones.

"We aren't going by train; we're going in the car. Can you drive a car? You could soon learn. Robert went to a place in Leeds to learn. I don't remember how Arthur learned, I think he just picked it up, you know, with going about with Jenkinson."

"Do you think he feels his present lack of a car very much?" asked Eustace.

"Oh, I don't know, I dare say," said Bertha, who had never troubled to probe her brother's feelings about motor-cars. "Here we are. You'll come in for a little, won't you?"

Eustace entered Beech Lea and stayed for a few minutes, kissing Bertha wistfully when he left. Bertha prattling, Bertha lovable, Bertha depending on him for the gratification of her whims, was a new and disturbing idea to him.

"Oh, mother!" cried Bertha when he had gone, "Mrs. Hollins is really! She manages him so! He can't do *anything*! Really it's a shame. I shan't let her go on like that, I can tell you."

Later, her cheeks still flushed with the overwhelming relief of her decision, she knelt beside her bed and offered up prayers—incoherent and contradictory—the gist of which was : “ *You made this muddle ; I haven’t done anything to deserve it, and it isn’t my fault, and it’s very good of me to be so resigned about it ; so do let me be happy with Eustace, and help him to get on, and help me to look after him because he’s so weak, and help me to take him away from his horrid domineering mother.* ”

Eustace returned home in a thoughtful mood. As he hung up his coat and hat in the hall—his mother and sisters had already gone upstairs to bed—he whistled the “ *Miserere* ” from “ *Il Trovatore* ” and considered the question of love. How many marriages were made as his with Bertha was to be made ? Perhaps the majority—that was why romantic loves and great passions were so interesting, because they were so rare ; they were the great unattainable of most men’s lives. This question of Bertha and her affection for him, and what he was to do with her and with it, must be considered with meticulous care. No shirking it with Gibbon ! His was a great responsibility, for Bertha, though rich and assured in some ways, was in all essential things as poor, naked, and shivering a weakling as it had been his lot to meet.

In the room above Mrs. Hollins was realizing and deliberately facing the fact that she did not like Bertha and that Bertha did not like her. Bertha would try to take Eustace from his mother, she knew ; well, so let it be. Mrs. Hollins, who loved her son dearly, and was capable of any amount of self-sacrifice for him provided that he used her sacrifice in the way she desired, was quite ready to give him up to a woman who would make him rich and well-thought-of. But to his former mistress, Literature, who only begged his odd leisure hours, she would not concede one jot or tittle. She lay down strong and resigned, certain of her duty and prepared to do it at all costs—while in the adjoining room Lizzie, standing with her hands clasped upon the rail of the high brass bedstead, her head bowed, painful tears coursing slowly down

her cheeks, learned by bitter experience a fact which Eustace might well have entered amongst his psychological observations :

“ Nothing causes such profound suffering as to see those you love suffer and be unable to help them.”

The remembrance of Eustace's face as it had been that evening, hot, miserable, humiliated, twisted Lizzie's heart in an intolerable spasm of pain. She walked up and down the room, wringing her hands in impotent wretchedness, and muttering :

“ I hate her ! I hate her ! Why is she so horrible to him ? She must see how it hurts him ! Oh, I can't *bear* that it should go on always like this. He can't marry her ! I'd rather see him dead than married to her. Oh, Eustace, how can you be such a fool as to love her ? She doesn't love you, that I'll swear to. Oh, I can't *bear* it ! How can she humiliate him so ? I'll kill her before she shall marry him.”

The picture suddenly came unbidden to her mind of Eustace as a curly-haired child, playing joyously in his bath while she, his elder sister, stood beside her mother's knee and spoke baby language to him about an extremely grimy floating duck which he adored.

Ah, that duck ! In an uncontrollable outburst of misery Lizzie flung herself down upon her bed and sobbed out her grief. Yet even in her sorrow she was unselfish ; fearing that Eustace might hear her sobs and be disturbed, or wonder because her light remained burning for so long, she rose and with unsteady fingers turned out the gas, then, crouching beside her bed on the threadbare carpet, buried her head beneath her pillow and gave vent to her great grief.

Ah, that duck ! The gay griminess of the duck and Bertha's careful zeal for her wavy hair were incompatible as ideals. Eustace would have to choose between them. Lizzie rose and proceeded with a controlled fierceness to undress.

“ He shall have his duck,” she told the dark room, “ if I have to murder her to give it him.”

CHAPTER X

MISERY OF EUSTACE

1.

EUSTACE was waiting for Bertha at the bottom of the Lane. She was to meet him there by appointment that Saturday afternoon and take a walk with him. The engagement was now some two months old and had ceased to be the talk of the town.

Eustace, who was much given to self-analysis, had decided that he could put up with almost anything in life provided that some few essentials were left to him. These essentials were reading, writing, and the countryside. It was a primary necessity of his being to take long walks over the surrounding hills; nothing healed his misery and gave him courage so well as the absolute freedom and unconventionalism of Nature. Now that term had begun at the Institute, he did not get much time for writing, and Bertha occupied his leisure hours to such an extent that he was driven to reading in bed in the small hours of the morning, his eyes blinking with sleep and his understanding gradually losing grip of the words, which he was nevertheless obliged to read if he wished to preserve his good temper and mental balance. In spite of these difficulties, however, he managed both to read and write, and he meant also to secure his third essential. If Bertha required his company on Saturday afternoons, she must go for walks with him. If Bertha intended to spend her life with him, she must recognize the existence of his three essentials and leave them unmolested, just as he would leave unmolested her religious beliefs and conventional manners. He had determined, after a period of considerable mental unrest, to accept Bertha as his fate

and make her into a sensible, tolerant, affectionate wife. Far be it from him to compel her thoughts and ideas into his mould, but there were other ways of bringing out the best in her, and these he meant to try.

Bertha's small, slender figure turned the angle of the Lane and approached. Eustace's pulse did not miss a beat for joy, but it would be idle to say that he was not glad to see her. He had by now a certain quality of affection for Bertha, though its texture was shot across with black threads of sudden passing hatred. It was pleasant to him to visit Beech Lea, where he was very kindly received by Mrs. West and Gladys; he enjoyed the comfort and the lack of sordid domestic detail there; being a healthy young man, he also enjoyed the excellent Beech Lea meals. It was also pleasant to him, previously so lonely, to feel that one person at least in Hudley was interested in everything he said and did. True, Bertha's interest was usually shown by criticism and disparagement, but she *was* interested, and she was of his own generation, and she was extremely pretty. It was certainly pleasant to Eustace to kiss her pretty freckles—though she was annoyed when he once mentioned them—and to stroke her wavy black hair; and it was extremely interesting to him to become gradually more and more intimate with such a marvellously feminine person as Bertha. It was a delight to him to adventure upon some fresh lover-like detail each day. Being of a generous nature, he responded with all his heart to the thought that Bertha was to be dependent on him for food and warmth and happiness; he smiled with wonderful tenderness at her whenever she said something particularly narrow minded and idiotic; he humoured all her caprices, shielded her from his mother's adverse criticism, ordered a suit from Arthur's Bradford tailor—the price of which simply terrified him—to please her, and bought her chocolate-boxes tied up in mauve or yellow ribbon because these colours suited her pale, dreamy face and dark hair.

Bertha's feelings towards Eustace ran up and down the

gamut several times daily. When he arrived at Beech Lea moody and depressed she was frightened and tried various arts to cheer him up. She discovered by experience that to play the wistful child infallibly brought him through tenderness to joy. She despised him for allowing such "baby-work" to influence him, but did not hesitate to make use of his weakness. Sometimes, on the other hand, when Eustace entered the room bright and self-confident, she positively hated him for his silly conceit and did her best to prick the bubble of his self-esteem by some harshly critical sentence. At other times she would be genuinely touched by some instance of his unfailing kindness and sympathy. She hated to hear him talk about books and theories, for that made her feel that he did not require the maternal protective love which was all she had to give him. She hated to hear him talk gossip, for he did it badly and looked such a fool while he was doing it. Her general attitude may be summed up as: "Eustace is a really kind and good-natured man, but he is inclined to be weak and foolish; he needs constant criticizing, constant plain speaking, constant urging, to keep him up to the mark; and it's a good thing he has me to do it for him instead of his cross old mother." His lovemaking exasperated her by its silliness. She hated, too, his habit of jocularly calling articles by other than their proper names; he called sugar-tongs "pincers" and referred to most implements as "that twiddly thing." Then, too, his intense joy in small actions irritated her beyond bearing; he threw pieces of coal on the fire with a magnificent sweep, banged windows and drawers out of sheer excitement in their swift motion, and even cut slices of bread with gusto. One day she would peevishly complain that he was never serious about anything, and the next he would frighten her by his unutterable gloom and bore her with fierce idealistic speeches about the wrongs of some class of people or another. At times she forgot him altogether, but she never forgot that she was engaged to be married. After all, in order to be married

one had to marry someone—this was the sequence of ideas in the mind of the “modern” Bertha—so she accepted Eustace as her fate with resignation, if also with a slight tinge of boredom. When thoughts of William Irwell came into her mind, she quite dutifully put them away from her; and this was the easier, as she had not seen him since her engagement—the work of keeping all his businesses going and trying to lose as little money as possible in the prevailing slump kept him fully occupied.

“I’m not very late, am I?” was Bertha’s greeting.

“No, dear,” replied Eustace untruthfully, stumbling round her to the outside of the pavement.

Bertha, irritated by his clumsiness, gave her fur an impatient twitch. Eustace’s attention was thus drawn to her clothes, and his heart sank. It was not alone her high-heeled, light-coloured suède shoes pattering along the pavement beside him which convinced him that Bertha did not mean the same thing by a “walk” as he did; her beautiful hat, delicate silky blouse, and thin stockings, were quite unfitted to battle with the moorland winds, and he could not imagine her clambering a stile clutching a muff in one hand and holding her fur in an elegant position with the other. Eustace’s own sisters were not good walkers, but he had often spent whole Sundays on long walks with Arthur West and his wife, and he knew that Marjorie’s equipment for a walk—thick tweeds, a shirt-blouse, small cap, substantial brogues, and woollen gloves which she speedily removed and stuffed into Arthur’s pocket—was eminently suited to Hudleian latitudes and altitudes, and as different from Bertha’s as possible.

“We won’t go very far, will we?” suggested Bertha. “I don’t want to be out very long.”

Eustace, convinced that she did not wish to go at all, made an effort to be unselfish, and said: “Would you rather go to the pictures?”

Bertha halted—they were about to turn off towards the hills—and looked angrily at him.

"Really, Eustace!" she said in an aggrieved tone, "why can't you say what you really want to do, and keep to it? If I'd thought you wanted to go to the pictures I'd have put something decent on. I've put *all* my old clothes on, on purpose to go for a long walk with you."

Eustace stared at her in complete amazement.

"They don't look old," he ventured awkwardly.

"You don't know anything about clothes," Bertha told him rudely. Rather ashamed of her abruptness she added: "Do you—silly boy?"

Eustace, mollified at once by the caress in her voice, admitted his complete sartorial ignorance and worked in a compliment. The two turned off Prince's Road. Eustace chattered gleefully about routes for the walk. In order to break her in gradually he proposed to take her over the hills to Denbridge and return by tram—some four or five miles, including a steep stony ascent beside a charming stream, and a tramp along a grey road of good surface, from which there was a glorious view of moor and field. Bertha's replies became few and monosyllabic. Eustace glanced anxiously at her and saw irritation written on her face. His powers of penetration and analysis, well-trained by constant use, worked as keenly when their object was Bertha as upon a stranger.

"She doesn't really want to go for a walk," he thought. "She answered me abruptly about the pictures because it's her instinct to contradict, and now she is annoyed with herself for letting slip the opportunity for evading the walk. She's too proud to say she prefers the cinema, but she's angry with me for not persuading her to do what she really wishes."

(In this analysis he was quite correct, except that in his educated brain ideas were clear and definite, while in Bertha's half-opened intelligence they were dim and confused.)

Eustace's heart contracted with a sudden pang, and he said impulsively:

"I think we'd better go to the pictures after all."

"Why?" said Bertha, colouring with annoyance.

"I think it's going to rain," observed Eustace inventively, scanning the grey sky.

"Do you?" said Bertha doubtfully, turning her pretty face upwards. Sheer perversity caused her to add: "I don't think it is."

"I felt a drop on my face a moment ago," lied Eustace, eager to persuade.

"Did you?" said Bertha, yearning to be convinced. "But we couldn't get to the theatre from here without going back ever such a long way. Besides, it would be so *silly*."

"We could take a tram from the bottom of this road," urged Eustace, turning a corner.

Bertha demurred and hung back; and Eustace was obliged to spend a solid five minutes in persuading her to do as a favour to him something which she wanted to do and he did not. At length she consented; they caught a tram to town, Bertha's face brightened and she became talkative.

"It's really growing *very* black," she said, peering up at the sky through the tram window.

"Oh, very," agreed Eustace sarcastically.

"Of course the pictures are usually very poor," observed Bertha with scorn. In reality she adored the cinema, but thought it bad taste to admit a liking for such a plebeian form of entertainment. "*Very* poor," she repeated, and felt that her emphasis did her credit.

"Oh, they're not bad sometimes," countered Eustace wearily; he had learned by experience that this was the correct answer to make to Bertha's observations on things she was ashamed of liking.

They entered the flamboyant building.

When they emerged two hours later the grey sky had gone, and the last brilliant rays of the setting sun shone in their faces and dazzled them as they trailed slowly up Prince's Road. The behaviour of the weather exasperated each of them almost to the point of weeping, and Bertha

was choking with rage on another score, for Eustace had insulted her by taking her into the cheap seats.

"If he thinks I'm going to stand that kind of thing he's mistaken," she told herself angrily, setting her mouth. "Poor or not poor, I'm not going to be taken into cheap seats like that. He must set to work and *make* some money. I'd rather not go at all than go into the shilling seats," she concluded, and felt virtuous. She glanced furtively at Eustace's frowning face. "He knows I'm angry with him," she thought.

In this she was wrong. To Eustace two-shilling seats at the cinema were like first-class tickets on a railway train, impossible and unnecessary luxuries about which he did not trouble his head. His frowns proceeded from a sudden bitter hatred of Bertha, which he strove successfully to conceal and quell.

"Enjoyed it?" he said mildly to her.

At this Bertha stood still, and announced in a loud voice:

"You'd better not come to Beech Lea to tea to-day." (She was really so infuriated with him that she could not bear his company a minute longer. "Fool!" she thought. "Blind fool! Can't he see that I'm annoyed with him?")

"Oh?" said Eustace mildly, rather surprised.

It was not within Bertha's capacity to tell him frankly that she was furious with him; the conventions had to be observed. She invented cleverly on a substratum of truth:

"It's Fred's birthday, you see; and mother is naturally rather upset."

Eustace's face and feeling changed at once to sincere regret.

"I'm awfully sorry your mother still feels it so deeply," he began with generous sympathy. "Of course I won't come in if you think it will upset her."

"Isn't he a fool?" queried Bertha mentally. "He thinks everything I say is Gospel truth."—"You'll be coming in to-morrow, then?" she said aloud ungraciously.

“ Yes. Mayn’t I have a kiss ? ” suggested Eustace with a smile. They were standing within the curve of the Lane, invisible from the road and protected by the interlacing branches of the black and still wintry trees from the windows of the Lane’s residences.

Bertha’s patience was exhausted.

“ What, *in the road* ? ” she demanded with fierce scorn, and turning on her heel minced—it was the only gait permitted by her high heels—angrily up the Lane.

Eustace attributed this and other peevishnesses of the afternoon to Bertha’s natural grief for Fred. He was always ready to attribute Bertha’s failings to her loss of Fred, and the thought extended itself to other people and widened his sympathies. How many others he knew whose bitterness and bad temper might be attributed to such losses, which in a Utopia such as Eustace was always planning would have been averted. Take for example his mother. Between Lizzie and himself there had been another child, a bright boy of exceptional promise who had died from pneumonia at the age of five. It was a tradition in the family that Mrs. Hollins had knelt beside his bed alone through the night hours of the crisis—her husband being himself ill at the time—putting brandy constantly between the child’s lips ; but even the artificial stimulant could not rally him, and he passed. Eustace, walking soberly home through the cold twilight of early March, liked to think that his mother would have been a better and a brighter woman if this dark-haired boy—very like Mrs. Hollins in face—had lived. He felt that he himself was at best but a makeshift son to her, and he pitied her generously and with his whole heart. Then, too, if Lady Huntley had lived perhaps Violet Irwell’s tragedy would never have been enacted.

“ Poor Bertha ! ” said Eustace thoughtfully.

He let himself into the empty house and proceeded to prepare his own tea, for as nowadays he usually spent Saturday afternoon and evening at Beech Lea, his mother and sisters had gone over to Denbridge to visit a friend.

His meagre tea over, he was faced with the delightful prospect of an evening alone. He fetched out his treasured manuscript and sat in front of it for a long time, pen in hand; but though he knew exactly what was going to happen next in the story he felt a distaste amounting to repulsion to putting it down. By dint of flogging his conscience he managed to squeeze out a sentence or two, but they were so bad that he gave it up and betook himself to reading. At intervals throughout the evening he made further attempts to write, but the page was still blank when his mother's latchkey was inserted in the front door. He hastily flung the pile of paper into a handy cupboard and went into the hall to offer his explanation for being at home, which Mrs. Hollins found extremely unsatisfactory. After a dismal hour of commonplaces, culminating in a burst of tears from Daisy, who was apt to grow hysterical when fatigued, the family retired to bed.

It was a cold night, and Eustace luxuriated in the warmth of the bedclothes. He was about to embark on hazy golden visions of an impossible world preparatory to going to sleep when something began to worry him. He sighed, and mutely began to analyze his feelings and inquire what it was. The discomfort grew and grew until he discovered that a sentence which he had read in his manuscript that night was wrong, and that the right words were clamouring at his mind for admittance. He considered the words, found them good, and saying to himself: "I shall remember them in the morning. Good thing I brought the thing upstairs with me. I can alter the sentence before I go down to breakfast to-morrow," he turned over and tried to go to sleep.

The matter, however, was not so easily settled. The two halves of his brain began to argue:

"I shall remember the words in the morning. It's much too cold to get up now. Besides, how silly!"

"You know you *don't* always remember the exact phrase in the morning. First raptures aren't so easily

recaptured. If you really cared about your work you'd get up and alter the words now."

With a sigh of exasperation Eustace suddenly threw back the bedclothes and groped across the room towards his candles. It was bitterly cold. He stubbed his toes against the dressing-table. Roundly cursing the divine afflatus, which allowed him to waste a whole evening and then blew at such an inconvenient hour, he struck a match and lighted a candle, and ruffled the scrawled pages which lay on the dressing-table till he found the phrase he wanted. Bending over the page at a back-breaking angle, his feet shrinking from contact with the cold linoleum, he altered the sentence, paused, altered it again, paused again, transposed two words, then blew out the candle and hurled himself shivering but joyful back into bed. Not that he was quite so unsophisticated as to imagine that his first novel would set the world on fire, for he had large and well-founded doubts as to whether it would ever find a publisher; but the pure joy of having expressed a subtle emotion in simple but absolutely accurate words made him smile to himself in the dark.

Suddenly it occurred to him to wonder what would happen if the divine afflatus blew thus unseasonably when he was married to Bertha. His smile vanished. He imagined the peevishness on Bertha's face, the disagreeable scorn on her lips, if she were ever awakened in the middle of the night by her husband's irresistible desire to write down a word. He sighed heavily and began to feel extremely miserable.

"She shan't spoil my life, confound her," he told himself. "If she's going to live with me she must fall in with my ways."

He remembered the occurrences of the afternoon, and had a horrid qualm. Was he sufficiently strong minded and hard hearted to continue habits which Bertha disliked and which made her unhappy?

"The answer is in the affirmative," he announced firmly.

“Liar!” jeered the sensitive half of him—the half which would commit an infamy to spare itself the sight of other people’s pain.

2.

Isabel and Robert West were giving a bridge party on the following Saturday evening, that day having been chosen so as to permit of Eustace’s presence. Lizzie and Daisy were also invited. On the Saturday morning Eustace received a note from Robert asking him to come round a few minutes before the hour specified, as he wanted his advice on the subject of boarding-schools for Bobbie. Eustace, who could never read between the lines where his own interest was concerned, took him at his word, and went prepared to criticise syllabuses and adjudicate on teaching qualifications. As Robert’s mansion was some distance from any convenient tram route and cab fares were prohibitive to the Hollinses—taxis being beyond their wildest dreams—Eustace was obliged to take his two sisters along with him, a fact which caused him acute embarrassment. As soon, however, as he had rung the bell and the superior parlourmaid had opened the door, Isabel appeared from a back room, very gracious and décolletée, her fair face covered with a white film of powder which she had dabbed on and forgotten to smooth away. Behind her came Agatha, who out of sheer nervousness kissed Lizzie without in the least intending to do so. Isabel swept them all upstairs, Daisy’s eyes fastening avidly on her bare shoulders and the clinging grace of her filmy black dress, Lizzie smiling encouragingly down at Eustace, and Agatha blushing and miserable, not sure whether she had been introduced to Eustace or not, and whether one shook hands when in evening dress or merely bowed.

Robert appeared and drew Eustace into a back room and offered him a cigar. (Like his father, he never smoked cigarettes or a pipe.) Eustace, though he consumed quantities of cigarettes, was not at home with

cigars, and did not really like them, though he would have been ashamed to admit it. He smoked this one carefully and with a solemn air of connoisseurship, and listened to Robert's remarks on schools, which were so perfunctory that he was really astonished. As Bobbie had been entered years ago for a certain number of Public Schools and only two had a vacancy this year the choice did not appear to be wide. From this subject Robert slid on to politics, thence to the slump in trade, upon which he spoke with a full heart and a gloomy brow, and finally asked Eustace directly if he would like to take on a certain job in his mill.

"I've no experience, no experience at all," stammered Eustace, colouring with painful surprise.

Robert murmured that he would soon learn. "Of course, business is very slack just now, very slack indeed. But still . . . Afterwards, you know, when you've got into the way of things a bit, I thought you might take over that new place we've just opened. It's only small . . . I shouldn't want you to specialize particularly . . . more a question of keeping an eye on things . . . of course, technical knowledge is very useful—my father, you know, is quite an expert; I always consult him when I'm in a difficulty. But I want a man really, and we may as well keep it in the family. I dare say it would suit Bertha all right."

Mrs. West, who was Eustace's very good friend, was constantly talking in and out of season about "doing something for Eustace. Bertha's twenty-six, you know. It would be such a mistake to have a long engagement." Robert had often heard this remark, and he had turned it over in his mind and decided that Eustace would be of real use to him, though this decision hurt him because it admitted a fact which was the great and lasting sorrow of the Wests, and which they therefore strove to deny—namely, that Robert's dark and gloomy boy Bobbie was "peculiar"; not exactly mentally deficient, but certainly abnormal. He was taciturn, morbid, unsociable, not

always morally reliable, and he had an extraordinary aversion for his mother which was strewing grey threads amongst the fair waved hair of the butterfly Isabel. His likes and dislikes were terribly strong, and when in the company of people he liked he became quite bright and ordinary. He liked Eustace. Robert, himself a gloomy man, was constantly worrying about what would happen to his family when he died—he had a weak chest which troubled him. He had recently taken to himself a business partner, or, rather, amalgamated his own business with that of another man. This man was shrewd and clever, but also hot tempered and inclined to encroach; moreover, he had sons of his own. What would happen in the future, when the peculiar Bobbie had charge of his end of the business, upon which his mother and two sisters would be dependent? Robert had sufficient experience of the turnings of Fortune's wheel to know that widows and inexperienced young men were often ousted from money that was their own; he even knew of just such cases as his, where the families of men of substantial wealth had ended their days in grinding poverty through the indiscretions of sons and the encroachments of partners. He had hoped that Fred would become his partner and play the part of mentor to Bobbie. That hope had passed. True, there was Arthur, but Arthur had a family of his own to look after, and he was a busy man; moreover, Bobbie did not like his uncle.

Robert had only conversed with Eustace twice, but he was convinced of his absolute integrity and his almost ridiculously scrupulous honesty. If Eustace occupied a responsible position in the business, the only person likely to be ousted from anything was himself; he was incapable of encroaching, domineering, or underhand tricks of any kind; no matter how tiresome, peculiar, and irresponsible Bobbie became, Eustace would be patient with him and see that he got his share of his father's wealth. Robert realized Eustace's lack of business experience, but he thought—not knowing Eustace very well—that this could

be remedied ; to give Eustace a place in his firm would enable him to marry Robert's sister at once, which was presumably what she wanted ; and at the same time it would be doing well by Robert's son—whom he loved intensely—to put at his elbow a man straightforward, unselfish, incapable of a mean action, and personally agreeable to him.

Eustace knew none of these things ; he was not even aware of Bobbie's tragedy, for he had put down certain slight peculiarities which he had observed while coaching him to the boy's recent illness. He was conscious of three things : Robert's great kindness, his own lack of business capacity, and his extreme distaste for the work offered. A dark abyss of business affairs, unrelieved by any gleam of literature, yawned before him, and his soul shuddered at the sight of it. Yet how refuse ? He looked around at Robert's oak furniture, the luxurious cushions, the electric lamps, the substantial clock, the oil-paintings on the wall ; he remembered the trim parlourmaid and the string of pearls, diamond-clasped, round Isabel's fair neck. How in the face of these things was it possible to say, "Thanks, but I have other views," and begin to talk about a few odd guineas received for an article the other day ? It was not possible unless he did not mind being thought a fool.

"You're no genius," Eustace told himself. "You haven't even had a single reply to those three letters you wrote just after Christmas. Far better take this job, become a useful member of society, and get hold of some money."

"What would you do with money if you had it ?" inquired his other self bitterly. "It would be nice for your mother and Lizzie and Daisy, of course. But how about you ? There isn't much that money can buy that will please you. You could buy books instead of reading those in the Municipal Library, I suppose. You might travel. Do you see Bertha enjoying Italy ? You might visit the theatre often. Would Bertha sit out an intellectual play ?"

Some remark seemed necessary, so Eustace said slowly :
“ You know I’m still engaged at the Municipal Institute.”

“ You’re leaving in May, aren’t you?” said Robert. He paused a minute, then added : “ I think there’ll be more scope for you with me than with your uncle, but that’s for you to decide, of course.”

Eustace had never thought of entering his uncle’s mill since his return from France, and he said “ Yes ” in so perfunctory a manner that Robert felt annoyed. He had expected Eustace to welcome his really kind offer with enthusiasm.

“ I think I hear some guests arriving,” he said coldly, rising. Like his father, he was incurably pompous of speech. “ Perhaps I shall be wanted ; we’d better move into the other room. You’ll let me know your decision as soon as possible, won’t you?”

“ Yes,” said Eustace. Remembering that he ought to feel grateful, he stammered : “ It’s awfully good of you. . . .”

“ Not at all,” said Robert, still more coldly.

He led the way into the drawing-room. People arrived rapidly, and soon bridge was in full swing. Lizzie very wisely declined to play and sat on a sofa beside Marjorie—to whom bridge was an abomination. Marjorie was looking rather prettier than usual to-night in a new soft-toned frock which Arthur had brought home from Paris, whither he had recently been on business ; the excitement of his return had brightened his wife’s eyes, and she was very gay with Lizzie, whom as a kindly, unassuming person she liked. The two discussed the clothing of infants—Marjorie had some sewing of that description on her lap—to the great detriment of Mrs. West’s play, for she was more interested in the discussion than in her cards, and kept leaning back to say :

“ Marjorie, love, what will you say next!” or, “ *My* children always wore frilled petticoats with tucks and lace, but times are changed now.”

Arthur, who played bridge with casual excellence, gently bantered his mother and his wife and strove to keep Daisy from uttering *bêtises*, for which Eustace was sincerely grateful. Eustace's play varied between two extremes; when interested he could play with real brilliance; when preoccupied he played like a child of ten. To-night he was preoccupied, and his imbecilities drove Bertha, his first partner, into real anger. He sighed with relief when she left his table and her place was taken by Agatha. Eustace and Agatha as partners formed a preposterous combination; their losses were so heavy that they were ludicrous, and the tale of them spread about the room, exciting laughter in all quarters. The victors left the table; Agatha, blushing and miserable, moved into another seat; then, thinking that perhaps Eustace as a man ought to have changed while she remained motionless, hastily moved back again, was gently admonished by Mrs. West, "No, love, you don't play with Mr. Hollins again; you move here, you see, and play with somebody else *against* him," sighed, and remained silent rather than explain that Mrs. West was doing her an injustice, for she understood the system of progressive bridge quite well. Eustace, shuffling cards abstractedly and gazing into space, understood precisely what was passing in Agatha's unformed mind, and gave her a friendly twinkle which brought a shy but delighted smile from the child, revealing, as Eustace unconsciously noted, a row of small and pretty teeth.

"I hate bridge, don't you?" he said confidentially, and was rewarded by a bright look which changed to nervous alarm as the "winning couple" from the previous table came up and took their seats.

To Eustace the evening was a feverish nightmare. He wondered whether his temperature was rising—since the war he was subject to short, sharp attacks of malaria—and decided that it was. The room, with its red silk panels, its white paint, its Sheraton furniture scorched by the hot wood fire, its delicate china, its black cushions and

conventional "tumpties," became odious to him in spite of a certain beauty about it that he admired; even the white hyacinths growing in glasses and the daffodils in blue bowls, which were reflected in the polished surfaces of the tables as in the waters of a lake, seemed to him artificial and meretricious under the bright electric light. The stiff, shining, new cards which fell so malignantly on the green baize, the silver bonbon dishes heaped with chocolates, the cigarettes which Robert pressed lavishly upon his guests, all spoke of wealth. What was he doing in there, Eustace demanded of himself? Wealth and elegance were not for him; his place was out in the cold under the stars, with hard work and poverty and beauty and sweet music and magnificently impossible ideals. He might be a fiftieth-rate writer, but nevertheless his place was amongst the writers—the writing failures, perhaps—rather than with the successful men of business. However mean and poor his talent, he was a better man exercising it and failing than neglecting it with success. Indeed, unless he exercised it he was not a man at all; there was no Eustace Hollins apart from this writing habit of his; take his writing, reading, and dreaming away from his personality, and what was left? He applied a mental microscope and discovered a certain amount of good nature and a decided dislike of action, more weakness than was desirable, and a tendency to morbid irritability and selfishness. Pleasant! And that was what he had to become in order to marry Bertha. But he did not wish to marry Bertha. Time and habit had rather effaced the memory of Bertha's manœuvres, and he asked himself bitterly why on earth he had been such a fool as to ask her to marry him. He looked across to where she sat, resplendent in filmy yellow through which was visible marvellous underclothing. Eustace loathed marvellous underclothing; he thought it decadent and disgusting. He also disliked the unnatural arrangement of Bertha's hair, he disliked the scent she used, he disliked the ridiculous square of yellow gauze with which she gently

dabbed her powdered nose, he disliked the costly, high-heeled shoes in which it was impossible for her to do anything useful. His eyes fell upon the youthful Agatha in a severely modest white dress which did not fit, her hair scraped back from her timid, gentle face to comply with her ideal of what was ladylike, her red hands, her distressed forehead, her expression of loneliness and fear combined with a shamed grief that such things as low gowns and bridge parties should be while Sunday-schools were so neglected. . . .

"Of the two I'd rather marry Agatha than Bertha," thought Eustace, deliberately withholding his ace from a trick on which Agatha had mistakenly put her queen. He realized with a shock that such thoughts were disloyal to his betrothed. "But do I mean to be faithful to Bertha?" he asked himself while trying to explain the absence of his ace to his enraged partner. He looked at Bertha again and decided cynically: "I shall probably be faithful to Bertha all my life, and regret it all my life."

Meanwhile Bertha was in a state of uncontrollable excitement over the non-appearance of William Irwell, who had, of course, been invited. Was he remaining away because he could not bear to see her? If he came late, how would he behave towards her? Coldly and indifferently, or regretfully, or bitterly? Was she nothing to him now? She did not ask herself whether he were nothing to her, though if anyone had asked her that, she would have replied in sincere amazement: "But I'm engaged to Eustace!" Her nervous tension was, however, so great that from time to time abrupt shivers shook her body, and her eyes were feverishly bright. Occasionally Isabel murmured in a "hostess" tone: "I wonder *where* William is; he *might* have let me know," and Bertha, her teeth chattering, averted her head and took care to look uninterested.

At length there was a murmur in the hall, and William burst into the room, fresh cheeked, newly groomed, composed. Always jovial in society, he made the tour of the

guests in perfect complacency, explaining cheerfully that a ridiculous, feeble, and utterly unnecessary meeting in Bradford had detained him to an absurd hour. (The meeting was really one of serious importance.) He was introduced to Eustace, and carried off the introduction as a casual incident in a manner which most people considered natural, but which left Eustace himself—though he knew nothing of William Irwell's affairs—a trifle unconvinced.

It had in truth been a bitter hour for William Irwell when he returned to Hudley and found Bertha betrothed. His life lay in ruins after his first wife's defection; slowly he recovered, made plans to build up his life again and secure some quiet married happiness, a home, children, a wife he could understand; and behold! the plans had to be torn up, useless. Bertha's action had struck him so hard that the prevailing slump in business and the consequent anxiety and feverish activity really came as a boon to him, roused his fighting instinct, and helped him through some dark hours when his self-confidence burned low. He was a strong-minded and determined man, and had no intention of appearing in the public eye as a jilted lover; therefore he kept a composed face and a bright manner, but he did not enjoy himself that evening. As he shook hands with Eustace he judged him: "A soft-hearted fool. He'll lose all Bertha's money and never make any of his own. I shall have to stand by and look after her, or he'll drag her through hardships."

He passed on and greeted Bertha. Relief flooded Bertha's heart, for in spite of his casual air and commonplace words she knew that he was hers still. So long as William Irwell continued to be interested in her, life was worth while, and only so long. She was tied to Eustace, she intended to keep him and marry him and make him do what she wanted, but she desired William Irwell's allegiance as well to make life pleasant. Amid polite banter Gladys West resigned her cards to William; she really preferred to talk to Marjorie and Lizzie. It hap-

pened that Gladys was just about to move to Bertha's table, and William became Bertha's partner. To William the situation was burningly distressful, but whether it was pleasure or pain which stung so keenly he did not know. Chiefly he chafed under the irritating sense of failure; to be thwarted by such a man as Eustace was gall and wormwood to him. Moreover, he felt that many of the people present were watching him to "see how he would take it," and he found Gladys West's mild gaze and the suspicious glance of Lizzie Hollins—what a name! What a family for Bertha to marry into!—resting upon him too frequently for his comfort.

The party adjourned to another room for supper. Eustace began to feel really ill; he had a bad taste in his mouth, his hands were hot, his eyelids were heavy, and he yearned to cast himself into some dark place and sleep. He shepherded the awkward Agatha into a corner and waited upon her, quite forgetting Bertha, who had disposed herself very prettily in a large blue arm-chair, her pale cheeks and dark hair beautiful against a blue-and-gold cushion. Meanwhile William Irwell, determined to keep his end up and show the world that Bertha was nothing to him, collected some men by the door and related commercial anecdotes of a highly technical nature in an amusing and genial manner. This was all very well as long as it lasted, but presently the knot of men broke up, and William found himself handing jelly to Daisy Hollins and entering into conversation with her. Daisy was almost frantic with delight at this near approach of such a personable half-million, and presently her "Oh, Mr. Irwell, how *can* you!" echoed through the room. Eustace scowled at her, and William intercepted the scowl and took a savage delight in encouraging Daisy to the wide limits of her foolishness.

Bertha's colour deepened, and beneath her soft yellow transparencies her breast rose and fell in an angry tumult of emotion. It was not jealousy, so she told herself firmly—she was simply annoyed with Eustace for deserting her

in this absurd way. It was not jealousy, no, certainly not. In spite of almost incredible meannesses and vilenesses in her past history, Bertha—like everybody else—believed herself quite incapable of doing anything seriously wrong. Mistakes she might make, of course, but they were not *her* fault, she was sure; she attributed them all to the mismanagement of a careless Providence, and when she saw a plain, naked, ugly fact—such as that while she was promised in marriage to Eustace Hollins she resented jealously the attentions paid to another girl by William Irwell—Bertha recoiled from it in horror and strove to pretend that it wasn't there. She turned her head and said softly: "Eustace!"

Eustace, pale and heavy-eyed, advanced immediately. Putting her hand on his arm—an action which brought hot murderous impulses into William's throat—Bertha said quietly: "Eustace—I wanted to ask you—did Robert say anything to you this evening?"

"Yes," replied Eustace moodily. "I suppose you knew about it before?"

"Isabel told me. And what did you say to him?" asked Bertha eagerly.

"I said I'd let him know," replied Eustace, looking very glum.

Bertha's face fell, and her look of scornful dissatisfaction made Eustace wince.

"Have you a headache or something? You look very miserable," said Bertha.

"A touch of malaria, that's all—I often have it," said Eustace stiffly, nettled by her tone.

"You'd better go home if you're not well," suggested Bertha coldly.

"I'm quite all right, thank you."

"You'd much better go home—there'll be dancing, and you know you don't like it," persisted Bertha. "Oh, Isabel!" Isabel paused in her passage with a pistachio trifle. "Isn't it a pity? Eustace has got a touch of malaria. He often has it since the war, you know."

Isabel sympathized; Lizzie said triumphantly: "I thought he had;" and Mrs. West maternally insisted that Eustace should go home at once. "Much better take no risks, love. Of *course* we shall see the girls safely home for you." Arthur volunteered to drive Eustace home in Robert's car and return at once in it. "It will take about seventeen minutes there and back," he said with the accuracy of the practical scientific man. Eustace, who, like a sick animal, desired to hide from the gaze of his kind, became the centre of a bevy of sympathizing helpers. Presently he was left alone with Bertha in the hall for a few moments while Robert and his brother stumbled through the windy March dusk up to the garage and pushed back its sliding doors. Eustace put an arm round Bertha and fiercely kissed her mouth, pressing her head back against his shoulder; and all his hate for her was in the kiss. (He knew that she disliked any display of passion.) Suddenly he released her, thoroughly ashamed of himself. "Malaria," he muttered to himself as his excuse. Unlike Bertha, however, he had a reasoning faculty, and this replied at once: "Nonsense! Sheer barbarism."

"Really, Eustace!" said Bertha in tones of cold annoyance, "I wish you wouldn't do so."

"Do you object to my kissing you?" demanded Eustace furiously.

"Don't be so silly—you say such ridiculous things, Eustace," complained Bertha with sincerity. "Shall you be well enough to come round to-morrow afternoon?"

"Probably," snapped Eustace, divining that she did not want him to come.

Arthur appeared and took Eustace away.

To Bertha's intense disappointment William Irwell danced with her but once that night, and throughout that one dance, true to his rôle of disinterested cheerfulness, asked her questions about Eustace. Her replies increased William's bitterness. The thought that Bertha preferred a "dreamy, unpractical, silly sort of chap, with his head

stuffed full of untested theories," to himself struck him just such another blow as his wife's elopement with a stuck-up Regular Army man, whose toothbrush moustache and well-groomed hair concealed a lack of business acumen and even of common sense which nauseated William. Was there something the matter with William's type of hard-headed business man that women shrank from it so? Surely not; it was only in magazine fiction that girls were dreamy and romantic, in real life they were more practical and more capable of sordid detail than any man. Was there something the matter with William himself? He winced at the thought, and began to console himself—he was better looking, better mannered, more cheerful and a better man in every way than Robert West, who, nevertheless, managed to hang on to his pretty, empty-headed wife.

"The scholastic profession is so abominably underpaid, I've always understood," observed William lightly.

"Oh yes, terribly," murmured Bertha, not in a position to state that Eustace was about to embark on a commercial career.

"Yes, really it's a shame," continued William on a note of sympathy. "Especially considering the amount they have to spend on their education. Is Hollins an Oxford or a Cambridge man?"

"Neither," admitted Bertha from a tormented heart.

William gave a sympathetic murmur.

"The war is responsible for a great many damaged careers," he conceded generously.

"But I think Eustace would really prefer a business life," protested Bertha, exasperated into a lie.

"I shouldn't advise anyone to start business just now," urged William darkly. "Those who are out of it are the lucky ones. By the way, Bertha, I don't believe I've ever formally congratulated you. I'm sure I hope you'll be extremely happy." In spite of his efforts his voice was warm with feeling, so that his congratulations sounded like the sincere well-wishing of an old and valued friend.

"He thinks I *love* Eustace Hollins," thought Bertha with a bitter pang. "Thank you, William," she said aloud in her rather high tones, and produced an artificial smile. For the life of him William could not help adding in a murmur: "Rather unexpected, perhaps, your engagement?"

Instantly he felt that he had committed an indiscretion. He had nearly betrayed what he most wished to conceal. "Ah, there goes the music again," he said hastily. "Will you excuse me?" He rose and with a slight bow uttered the formula, "Well, thanks very much, Bertha; a most enjoyable dance."

"Thanks very much," repeated Bertha mechanically. Making a tremendous effort she rose and sauntered with an unconcerned air to a seat beside Lizzie, to whom she remarked in a dull voice: "Does Eustace often have these rounds? I mean, is he bad with them?"

"Sometimes," replied Lizzie with hostile brevity. She sniffed, and her bright beady eyes glanced suspiciously towards William, who was betaking himself towards Mrs. West, his next partner. He gallantly whirled her round for a few bars of a waltz and then deposited her on a capacious sofa in the square hall. Robert went up to have a few words with his mother.

"Well, you'll soon have only Gladys left at home, Mrs. West," began William, feeling the while as though harsh fingers were squeezing his heart.

"Yes," agreed Mrs. West. "Have you met Mr. Hollins before?"

"No. A schoolmaster, I understand?"

"For the present," said Mrs. West uncomfortably, looking at Robert, who said nothing.

"Yes—I understood from Bertha that he is keen to get into business, but this is hardly the time for it," said William, making conversation at random.

Robert, hearing this, concluded that Eustace's delay in accepting his offer was really due to thoughts of his uncle's business and not to any possible reluctance to change his

profession. He frowned darkly and felt annoyed, and presently made an opportunity to have private speech with his mother.

3.

That night as Bertha was brushing her hair before her mirror her bedroom door was opened and Mrs. West appeared, the customary placidity of her face marred by a look of anxiety.

"Bertha," she began uneasily, "I wish you would just mention to Eustace that your father and I both think he would do best to take the position Robert is offering him."

"I *have* mentioned it," said Bertha, with a dark look, really believing that she had done so.

"Because Robert seems to have got an idea that Eustace doesn't want to go to him—that he'd prefer to go to his uncle," continued Mrs. West with a worried air. "He seemed a little annoyed—Robert, I mean. I don't think it was quite wise of Eustace to give him that impression. Especially as Eustace seems anxious for a business career. What do you think he really means to do, love?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Bertha wearily. She jerked the brush once or twice down the long waves of her dark hair, her lips compressed. Suddenly the exasperations and miseries of the evening swept over her in a hot flood, and she burst out passionately: "Eustace is such a *fool*."

"Bertha!" exclaimed Mrs. West. She was genuinely shocked; a deep colour came into her smooth cheeks, and she was silent for a minute, unable to find words to express her displeasure. Then she continued with dignity: "How can you say such a naughty thing, Bertha! I don't like to hear a daughter of mine say an unkind thing like that about the man she loves. I'm afraid we've spoilt you, Bertha, with you being so delicate; you seem to take love and petting as your right, and never go a step out of your way to make other people

happy. Married life is give and take, and you can't expect your husband to love you unless you show him some consideration. I think you're often very abrupt in your manner with Eustace; your father has noticed it too. It's not as though your inclination has been forced in any way; you chose him yourself without consulting *us* at all. Eustace is a dear, good lad, and I shall feel quite safe to confide you to him. He has a perfect right to decide for himself what his life is to be. I'm grieved at you, Bertha, I am indeed, and your father hasn't yet got over the shock he had when he realized you'd been meeting Eustace secretly. How could you do it, Bertha! And then to say such dreadful things! I suppose you've been quarrelling with Eustace. What have you been quarrelling about?"

"We haven't been quarrelling at all," protested Bertha, who, naturally timid, was really frightened by this harangue.

"Then don't be so petulant and naughty," commanded Mrs. West severely. "I must say you're not as good a daughter as you might be, Bertha, considering the money and affection we've lavished on you. We've never grudged you anything. It isn't as if you had any of these modern ideas in your head, like Arthur and Marjorie; they're often very tiresome and irritating, but you do know where you are with them, and at least they're straightforward. You aren't always truthful, Bertha."

"Mother!" protested Bertha, really upset by this accusation and also subconsciously wondering in a terrified way which of her deceptions her mother had detected.

"Only this evening," said Mrs. West, colouring with shame, "Lizzie Hollins made some sort of a queer remark to me about Fred, and Eustace being good at getting his own meals ready. And when I went a little farther with the matter, I found that last Saturday you'd told Eustace not to come to tea because it was Fred's birthday and I was upset about it. You told me Eustace hadn't come because he had a lot of work to do. Why didn't you want him to come?"

"I was annoyed with him," wept Bertha, thoroughly wretched.

"I don't know, Bertha; I really don't know," said Mrs. West, tears coming into her eyes, "how you can tell a lie about a thing like that. About Fred." Her face became contorted with grief, and her voice shook. "To me it seems a terrible thing to do. I don't think I shall ever quite forgive you for that, Bertha."

She turned and went from the room; and the consciousness of sixty-five years of a narrow but absolutely honest life lent dignity to her movements.

Bertha, thus left to herself, was for a few moments overwhelmed with contrition. Her lies, her recent abominable feelings about Eustace and William Irwell, her selfishness and her general bad temper, loomed black and terrific on her mental horizon. She shed tears of real remorse, and, hurrying into bed, buried her face in her pillow and cowered down between the sheets as one whose shame in her own deeds had to be hidden in triple darkness. Presently, however, she recovered a little, began to think her mother's displeasure too severe, and finally melted into sobs of self-pity at the thought that there was no one to whom she could turn, no one who really understood her wretched situation.

"If only mother had been a little more encouraging about William Irwell in the first place," she complained, "I should have felt more able to take her into my confidence, and then I should never have got engaged to Eustace. Never!"

Suddenly a thought, blacker than any which had yet visited her, leaped into her mind. What would her mother, so severe about such comparative trifles, think of her if she ever discovered the true story of Bertha's engagement to Eustace? In a paroxysm of terrified self-defence Bertha put that story away from her, and banished William Irwell from her thoughts. She admitted to herself, with a feeling of magnanimity at the concession, that some of her mother's criticisms had been justi-

fied. To-morrow she would behave differently ; she would be sweet tempered to all her family and perfectly charming to Eustace. She would talk to him so nicely and prettily about Robert's offer that he could not fail to take the sensible view of the matter. She would try to urge him on to some definite remark about their marriage. She would marry him soon, and not see William again till after she was married, and not often even then ; and she and Eustace would have a small, pretty house somewhere on the other side of the town, perhaps near Denbridge, and Bertha would be content with one maid and would take a real interest in the housework, and she would help Eustace with her advice, and push him on in the world, and make him rich—richer than William Irwell—and they would then live in a large, richly furnished house—larger than William Irwell's.

Yes, Bertha would be a good girl and do her duty by Eustace. It was hard, terribly hard, that Providence should have seen fit to impose such an uncongenial task upon her, and she deserved high praise for the conscientious manner in which she intended to perform it. She would not wear her best pink jumper to-morrow afternoon, for Eustace had a foolish objection to pink ; he preferred blue or grey. Gladys had a new blouse the colour of silvery ashes—Arthur had brought it her from Paris—which Bertha could borrow. . . .

She sank into a tranquil sleep.

CHAPTER XI

INEFFECTUAL STRUGGLES OF EUSTACE

1.

EUSTACE remained in bed for the greater part of the next morning, but descended at length to the Hollins's Sunday dinner, pale and shaky but with a normal temperature. On his breakfast-tray had lain a letter which had arrived on the previous afternoon, but which Mrs. Hollins had characteristically omitted to give him until his important interview with Robert—the true intent of which she suspected—should be over. The letter was from his friend in Edinburgh, offering him an obscure, unimportant, and undignified job on the staff of his father's newspaper. The salary was practically non-existent, and the prospects of improving it vague and entirely dependent upon Eustace's capacity for making himself noticeable; moreover, the work was more that of a clerk than that of a journalist. Nevertheless, in the days before his engagement to Bertha West, Eustace would have accepted the post instantly, as a favour from Heaven, and departed to Edinburgh by the earliest possible train after the conclusion of the Institute's term in a state of ecstatic glee. Now things were different. He hacked gloomily at a piece of overdone beef—it was one of the minor martyrdoms of his mother, who was an excellent carver, to sit with folded hands and wait patiently while Eustace sawed off uneven slices from the joint; she endured it because she thought he would be deeply hurt if she, a mere woman, offered to carve, whereas Eustace would have been overjoyed to be released from an unpleasant duty—and wondered what to do about the letter. He realized that Mrs. Hollins would oppose his departure to Edinburgh with tooth and nail;

her opposition was no new feature in his life, and he was hardened to it; but now there was also Bertha to be considered. He wondered how best to approach the subject.

"I see you had a letter from Edinburgh this morning," began Mrs. Hollins in an inquiring tone. She disapproved heartily of Eustace's letters from Edinburgh, for she had noticed that the reception of one always made Eustace moody and more than usually exasperating; for that reason she had suppressed this one for some seventeen hours.

"Yes. I've had a job offered on an Edinburgh newspaper," said Eustace, plunging.

For a moment Mrs. Hollins looked almost impressed, but she soon recovered her usual tone and asked abruptly: "At what salary?"

Eustace told her.

Mrs. Hollins snorted. "And what will your Miss West say to that?" she inquired with scorn. "You couldn't keep yourself on that, let alone her."

"Of course, I shouldn't expect her to marry me on that salary," said Eustace with impatience. "Do be sensible, mother. We should have to wait for a few years until my position was improved."

"She's twenty-six already," observed Mrs. Hollins pertinently. "Besides, look at the kind of life she's been used to. Daisy's been telling me about the goings-on last night. Such dresses!"

"I wish Daisy wouldn't wear that awful orange-coloured thing she had on last night," snapped Eustace. "It looks terrible with her yellow hair."

Daisy at once began to sob, and Mrs. Hollins—who had her own doubts about the orange-coloured dress—turned fiercely on Eustace: "Your own sister's not good enough for you now, I suppose? Why don't you make some money and buy her a new dress if you don't like that one? Those that pay the piper call the tune, and those that don't, don't. Remember that, Eustace Hollins. You'll

hardly *know* your own family when you're married to one of the 'Denbridge Wests'; they won't be good enough for you and your Bertha."

"Mother," began Eustace in a passion, "I don't know why——"

"He's not married yet," put in Lizzie ironically. "You'd better wait till he is, mother."

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Hollins, struck by her tone.

"'There's many a slip between the cup and the lip,' " observed Lizzie oracularly.

"Elizabeth Hollins!" shrieked her mother. "How dare you? What do you mean?"

"I mean," burst out Lizzie in a sudden passion of fury, "that I don't think Bertha West cares twopence for Eustace. She's in love with William Irwell; you've only to watch them together to see it."

There was a moment's appalled silence. Daisy stopped crying and gazed at her sister open mouthed; Eustace sat dumb and motionless, the blood throbbing behind his ears; Mrs. Hollins's face flushed deeply, then paled, leaving her strangely yellow and old looking. She glanced in terror at her son's face, dreading what emotion she might see written there.

"There now," she began hastily in a conciliatory tone, "see where we've got to with quarrelling about poor Daisy's flame frock! What silly things we do say when we're in a temper! You have a temper, too, you know, Eustace love, in spite of your gentle look. Lizzie, I think the gas from the oven's got to your head. What a ridiculous thing you said, love! No one could be fonder of her fiancé than Bertha is, I'm sure. I only wonder she hasn't persuaded her father or her brother to set up Eustace in business some way."

But Eustace was not to be drawn out by this observation; silently he completed his carving, and then, alleging his malaria as excuse, left the table and went upstairs, where he could be heard pacing restlessly up and down in

his bedroom. Mrs. Hollins thereupon attacked Lizzie fiercely and abusively for her wanton destruction of her brother's happiness; but Lizzie, her cheeks flushed and her hands shaking, persisted passionately: "It's true. It's true. She does *not* love Eustace." "Then why did she get engaged to him?" demanded Mrs. Hollins angrily. "God knows!" said Lizzie with emphasis, shrugging her shoulders. "You're a fool, Lizzie," concluded her mother firmly. "You don't know what you're talking about. Such a match as Bertha is for Eustace, and you try to spoil it! I don't say I'm very fond of her myself, but what's that to Eustace's future? Take the plates away and fetch the chocolate-mould in. You might take a bit up on a plate to Eustace and see if he'll have some. He ought to have something."

Lizzie did as she was bid, and found Eustace looking out of his window at the bright March sunshine. He turned as she entered, and she told her errand.

"I don't want the beastly stuff," said Eustace. "But why did you say that about Bertha?" He choked, and added haltingly: "I'm not going to give up my life to her, Liz, unless she loves me."

"Ask her," said Lizzie, her voice low and intense. "Why don't you ask her now if she loves you? Ask her this afternoon. Then you'll know. And if she does, there's no harm done. People often ask each other things like that, in a casual, teasing way, you know. At least, I suppose they do," she added in unconscious, bitter comment upon her spinsterhood. "Ask her this afternoon, Eustace. Tell her about the Edinburgh letter. You know I only want you to be happy."

Her low, fierce speech, her nostrils trembling with excitement, her fingers crisping about the iron rail of the bedstead, gave Lizzie a strange and tragic air. Eustace was alarmed.

"All right," he said awkwardly, "I'll ask her. Don't you worry, anyhow, Lizzie. It doesn't much matter what happens, one way or the other."

Lizzie took this as the utterance of blank despair. She clutched the chocolate-mould and fled, her heart tortured by the pangs of impotent love. To see him suffer, and be unable to help! She was quite rude to Mrs. Hollins about the mould, and effectually prevented her from disturbing Eustace's solitude.

At a quarter past three Eustace was shown into the Beech Lea drawing-room. All the family were assembled there in various stages of slumber, Bertha looking very charming in Gladys's grey blouse. She jumped up with a little cry.

"Oh, you are nice and early, Eustace!" she said. "Are you better? You still look pale. Are you fit to be out, do you think?"

"Quite, thank you," replied Eustace in a hollow tone. "Could you come out for a short walk with me, Bertha? Quite a short one."

"Oh yes! It's a lovely afternoon, isn't it?" said Bertha brightly. "I won't be a minute." She smiled up at him with a provocative air. "Do you know you've not kissed me this afternoon, Eustace?"

Eustace kissed her. Mrs. West opened an approving eye, and Bertha ran upstairs to don her outdoor garments. When she came down she sent Eustace ahead to inspect some budding daffodils in the garden, and whispered into her mother's ear: "I never *meant* to be really unkind to him, mother."

Mrs. West kissed her with grave approval.

"Shall we go on the promenade?" suggested Eustace when Bertha joined him. The girl assented; and the two made their way across a rough open space of grass—the inalienable donation to the town of Hudley's aristocratic landlord—which was this bright afternoon covered with couples strolling about and making love, to the long windy "promenade," a straight new road running along the edge of a wild precipice, from whence there was a glorious view of rolling green hills which grew larger and bluer as they receded into Lancashire.

Bertha tripped happily along beside Eustace, her high heels clicking on the green-grey stones. In some strange way Eustace's malaria and the present pallor of his face endeared him to her; she felt as though she had been married to him for many years and was united to him by many mutual experiences. To know that she was being good and charming, after so many months of disturbance and self-seeking, was very pleasant to her; she was overflowing with virtue and affection. Moreover, Eustace was wearing for the first time his new Bradford-made suit. Bertha approved of the suit, and decided that Eustace had really quite a distinguished air.

Far below in the valley a small canal running parallel with a still smaller stream, two railway lines, a viaduct, and a white ribbon of a road provided on weekdays endless amusement in the shape of traffic for small children who clambered up and down the rocky slope and clung to the small stunted oak trees which were permanently bowed by the relentless wind. This afternoon, however, the valley was quiet and peaceful; the clatter of the mill by the stream was hushed, no motor-lorries thumped heavily along the road, and the passage of a train was too rare an event to be counted on. The wind had driven the lovers from the promenade, and the children had on their Sunday frocks—in Bertha's opinion extraordinary garments of weird shape and crude hues—and were sternly forbidden to leave the road for the enticing rocks. A line of trees zigzagging down the opposite hill indicated the course of a small rocky stream; in the clear March sunshine the grey farm-buildings on the distant hills seemed wonderfully near and distinct. Eustace stood still and drank in the beauty of the scene. In spite of himself he felt more cheerful in this wind and sunshine and in the presence of the hills he loved.

"I should miss these hills very much if I had to leave Yorkshire," he said thoughtfully.

Bertha, standing beside him clutching at her hat, her skirts wrapped round her by the wind, observed: "Do you

think we might go down one of those paths, Eustace? It's rather windy up here."

"Of course," said Eustace, starting forward. The moderate tone of her request pleased him, and though his heart beat faster at the thought of the inevitable explanation which lay before him, he felt glad that he had chosen to unfold his Edinburgh plans to Bertha amid rolling country, beneath the blue and white March sky, instead of in the artificial elegance of the Wests' drawing-room. Then, too, he always felt more self-confident out in the open air than inside houses—entrance into a house depressed him unaccountably and too often deprived him of the power of candid speech.

They pursued a narrow and very stony path for some way down the hillside, and finally found a not too dirty seat sheltered by a scrubby oak. Eustace dusted the seat with his handkerchief.

"I might have brought a newspaper for you to sit on if I'd thought of it," he said remorsefully.

"Oh, I couldn't sit on a newspaper, Eustace!" exclaimed Bertha in alarm. "I couldn't really; it would look so awful." She arranged her skirts and sat down gingerly.

"When I was a kid I used to come down here for blue-bells," observed Eustace, glancing about him. "I remember Lizzie dragging me up the hill again by the hand in a motherly way."

"Fancy!" said Bertha politely.

There was a short pause.

"Bertha," began Eustace, colouring a little, "I had a letter from my friend in Edinburgh this morning. His father edits a newspaper there."

"Yes?" said Bertha absently, mentally framing her opening sentences about Robert and his offer.

"Of course, I've had a fair amount of experience in journalism in a small way on the *Hudley News*," proceeded Eustace, trying to control his habit of rapid incoherence and explain the matter lucidly. "I've always done a good deal of work for them in my holidays. I

wrote to this friend of mine about two months ago, and didn't hear anything for a long while. I thought he'd forgotten me. Now, however, he writes and says that I can have a job on his father's paper. To be quite frank, it isn't much of a job; in fact, it's an absolutely rotten one. But what can you expect when he doesn't know anything about me or my capabilities? Jolly good of him to give me a show at all, I think. It's a large paper, and I should gain experience, you see, and then move on and get a better job."

"But I don't understand," began Bertha, really bewildered.

"It would mean that we should have to wait a few years—the salary is very small," explained Eustace. "We should have to wait a bit before we got—get, no, got—married."

"Eustace!" exclaimed Bertha, leaning towards him, her breast heaving with sudden emotion, "you don't mean to say you're thinking of *taking* the job?"

"I should like to try it," replied Eustace, shirking the direct affirmative and despising himself for doing so.

Bertha was silent for a moment; passion rendered her incapable of speech.

"What do you *mean*?" she then burst out. "Do you mean you're going to *Edinburgh*? You're going to leave *me*? But how can you—we're engaged. What do you *mean*, Eustace?"

"I told you before," explained Eustace hotly. "I want to go to this paper in *Edinburgh*, stay there for a year or two and get experience, then move on and get a better job—perhaps in *London*, perhaps not. Then we could be married."

Bertha glared at him, her lips set firmly together, her nostrils dilated with anger. "And what salary will you get in *Edinburgh*?" she inquired in a choked voice.

Eustace winced and told her. The vials of Bertha's scorn opened and her contempt was poured upon him in a flood.

"Father gives me more than that to dress on," she taunted him. "*More than that.*"

"That's nothing to be proud of," muttered Eustace.

"What did you say?" asked Bertha sharply.

"I said that was nothing to be proud of," shouted Eustace in a sudden rage.

Bertha dissolved into floods of tears; her misery was genuine and acute.

"Oh, Eustace, how can you?" she sobbed heart-brokenly. "How can you be so unkind? We shan't be married for years and years if you go to Edinburgh! I wanted to be married this year. I wanted to have a nice little house in Denbridge—we should have been *so* happy. If you go into business with Robert we can be married ever so soon, and have a nice little house in Denbridge——"

Eustace's spirit melted within him. "For God's sake don't cry, Bertha!" he implored her, edging along the seat and putting his arm round her shoulders. "You'll drive me mad if you cry like that."

An accent of sincerity in his voice caused Bertha to raise her head and dab at her eyes with her handkerchief. "Say you won't go to Edinburgh," she begged him. "Oh, Eustace! Do say you'll go in with Robert, and then we can be married soon." Her voice trailed away again into sobs.

Eustace was about to promise that he would do anything she wished when he remembered Lizzie and her accusations. His face hardened, he leaned back against the seat, and observed coldly :

"You can't love me much, Bertha, or you wouldn't want me to give up my plans and make myself unhappy for you."

"I do," sobbed Bertha, not taking much notice of this accusation.

"You *can't*," persisted Eustace firmly. "I don't believe you love me at all. Do you, Bertha? Do you? I don't believe you love me at all."

Bertha lifted a face on which was written genuine terror and anguish. Had Eustace said these words to her yester-

day, she would probably have replied coldly: "No, I don't." But since the interview with her mother everything was different. Like most selfish people, she valued the expressed approval of unselfish people almost as much as her own comfort, and her mother's approval was evidently only to be obtained by loving and marrying Eustace. If she did not succeed in convincing Eustace that she loved him! If the engagement were broken! If Eustace told her parents that he was sure she did not love him! All sorts of terrifying chimeras pursued each other through Bertha's confused mind. The religious censure of her parents, the aristocratic censure of Robert and Isabel, the honest censure of Arthur and Marjorie, the plebeian censure of the Hollinses, the outspoken censure of all Hudley—these things she could not endure, and the only way to avoid them lay in marrying Eustace, marrying him soon, at once, before she saw William Irwell again. To tell Eustace the truth never occurred to her; all that concerned her harassed brain was how to make her lying sufficiently emphatic.

She clung wildly to Eustace's arm, and said in an anguished tone:

"How can you, Eustace! Of course I love you! Of course I love you! You can't love me, or you wouldn't say such dreadful things to me. You can't love me, or you would do what I wanted, and join Robert and give up this mad Edinburgh idea. You can't love me."

She waited, panting, for Eustace's hot denial of her charge, but none came. She turned her head to look at him, and saw him pale, composed, severe, gazing out over the valley. An awful qualm seized her, and abysses seemed to open at her feet. If Eustace did not love her, why then—Bertha's world would have to be entirely remade, and Bertha had not the courage to remake it. She pulled at his sleeve and urged him in a voice low and hoarse from emotion:

"Eustace, don't you love me? Eustace! Eustace, say you love me!"

Eustace turned and looked at her; his reason told him that the only proper, decent, and humane thing to do was to tell her the truth. Better a swift blow now than a lingering disillusionment through the years. But Bertha's pale, anguished face was raised pleadingly to his, her brown eyes were full of tears, her fingers clutched desperately at his sleeve, in her white throat little pulses throbbed intermittently, her whole body was quivering with suspense. Eustace cleared his throat and said:

"Of course I love you."

He knew as he said it that it was an abominable lie and that it involved his whole life; but to say words, even though true words, which would cause Bertha to droop her head in shame and humiliation and continue such suffering as she was evidently already before his eyes enduring, was a physical impossibility to him. He knew the right way as well as most, but if pursuing any course, however admirable, meant causing suffering to any person, however base, he would sink to any infamy rather than pursue it. As he sat there, patting Bertha's arm and murmuring soothing words, his unmanly weakness stared him in the face, and he loathed it. But he knew that if the same circumstances were presented to him again, he should tell the same lie. Aloud he said:

"Please don't cry, Bertha. I'm sure I don't know what we're quarrelling about, do you?"

Bertha's sobs gradually diminished, and her limbs ceased to tremble.

"You frightened me," she wept. "What should I do if you were to give me up, Eustace?" Inwardly she thought: "I shouldn't mind so much if he actually *jilted* me for some reason or other; people couldn't blame me then." The capacity to think of such a possibility showed that her self-control was returning. "And then about Edinburgh," she pursued aloud in a peevish tone. "If you want to marry me you simply *can't* go there, Eustace, you simply *can't*. Surely you can see that for yourself?"

"I do see it," replied Eustace gloomily.

“Then you’ll take Robert’s offer?” said Bertha more cheerfully. “Oh, Eustace, it’s time we were getting back for tea. Let’s go at once.” They rose and reascended the path. “It was really rather foolish of you, Eustace, not to accept it at once last night. He was *fearfully* annoyed about it; mother told me so. How if you were to write him a little note to-night? You could write it at Beech Lea, you know, and then it would catch the first post to-morrow morning.”

Eustace’s heart sank like lead. He made a last effort to assert himself.

“Bertha,” he said, “I don’t want to go into business with Robert; I want to go to Edinburgh.”

“You can’t both go to Edinburgh and marry me,” said Bertha sharply. “Only a few minutes ago you said you loved me; now you say you want to go to Edinburgh. The two things are absolutely—absolutely——”

“Incompatible,” said Eustace, unable to refrain from supplying this word so hostile to his cause.

“Absolutely incompatible. You said you loved me. I suppose”—with a tremendous inflection of irony—“that means you want to marry me.”

Eustace gave an inarticulate murmur. Just then they passed two of Bertha’s acquaintances, who glanced at her in surprise, for her eyes were red and her usually perfect complexion blotchy.

“I do think it’s mean of you, Eustace,” said Bertha angrily, in a low tone, “to make a scene like this out of doors. I must look a fearful fright. And I did mean to have such a nice afternoon.” The remembrance of all her good resolutions, thus horribly spoiled, made her feel bitter and inclined to lash out at her tiresome companion.

“I’m sorry,” observed Eustace simply.

The two walked on a little way in silence, Eustace prodding the rough ground uneasily with his stick. At length he said wearily:

“When were you thinking of—when would you like us to be married, Bertha?”

“ Oh, as soon as ever we can ! ” she said fervently. “ In September I should think we might venture. The Institute stops in May, doesn’t it ? So you would have been four months with Robert by September. It would be four months, wouldn’t it ? ” She began to count on her fingers.

Eustace turned and looked towards the hills. The sun was setting, and a golden light blazed on the windows of a farmhouse just across the valley. Where the two were then standing they were sheltered from the wind, and the scene had an indescribably calm, peaceful, mellow look. Bitterness welled up in the man’s heart as he realized that he was leaving all this fair, open, and joyous country behind and setting his face to a sordid and confined life of false values with the artificial Bertha. No longer would his mind be free and unconfined, at liberty to wander whither its reason led it ; it would have to adapt itself to conventional standards and class ethics. Impossible, he thought, to be voluntarily rich in these latter days and retain a sound philosophy. Instead of his Muse, which, however feeble, at least feared no man, he would have Bertha from now to his life’s end. And this because he had not the courage to tell an unpleasant truth.

The two reached Beech Lea. The family were at tea in the drawing-room, but Bertha led Eustace into Mr. West’s study in the rear. She took off her gloves with a pleased, conspiratorial air, and opened her father’s roll-top desk.

“ There ! ” she said, pulling out pens and envelopes and searching for a sheet of notepaper not stamped with the Beech Lea address. “ Now you can just write a little note to Robert. One of the girls can take it to post ; I think it’s Annie’s day out.”

Eustace sat down and took the pen into his hand and addressed an envelope to “ Robert West, Esq., Innisdale, Hudley.” He reflected with bitterness that none of the West family lived in terraces of numbered houses—except, of course, Arthur. He had temporarily forgotten Arthur.

Had Bertha been the sister of any one but Arthur, Arthur would have found a way of extricating Eustace from his present situation; but it was impossible to confide to Bertha's brother that marriage with Bertha was odious and detestable.

"Do hurry up!" urged Bertha, leaning against the mantelpiece.

"What shall I say?" asked Eustace stupidly.

"I thought you *knew* how to write things nicely," observed Bertha.

This was adding insult to injury. Eustace winced, and wrote hastily in a large uneven hand:

"I am sorry I did not let you know last night before I left what has, of course, been my decision all along—to accept your kind offer gratefully. I am afraid my business experience is *nil*, but this deficiency I hope soon to remedy under your able tuition. Bertha joins me in thanking you most heartily for offering me this long-desired opportunity of making good. Believe me, yours sincerely."

Here he paused and read this infamous document through, astounded that his brain could concoct and his hand inscribe such abominable lies.

"Read me what you've put," demanded Bertha, thoroughly enjoying herself in the rôle of wise helpmeet. ("It's his wife who has made him what he is," in imagination she already heard people saying.)

Eustace handed her the letter.

"It doesn't sound very business-like," protested Bertha in a dubious tone. "The last sentence is quite good, but 'able tuition' doesn't sound right at all; it isn't a bit the sort of thing people say."

Eustace took the letter from her.

"I think I should write another if I were you," advised Bertha. "People never write 'believe me' now; it's quite out-of-date. I should have thought you'd have known that."

"Don't talk to me like that, Bertha!" said Eustace in one of his fleeting bursts of rage. "I won't have it."

He signed his name to the letter in a furious scrawl, blotted it inadequately and thrust it into the envelope.

"Really, Eustace!" protested Bertha in a mild titter, casting down her eyes, "you needn't be so bad tempered about such a little thing."

Both of them knew that she could speak to him "like that" whenever she liked, with impunity.

Eustace sealed the envelope in silence; his little flash of anger was over, and he was filled with shame for having put his name at the bottom of such a tissue of lies—his own name, which he had hoped to see some day on the cover of a book. If only he had accepted Robert's offer verbally he could always have pretended to his conscience that he had been overborne by Robert's personality, or that the real Eustace had been dissentient and had remained silent simply because of his disability to express himself in speech; but to write a phrase like "long-desired opportunity of making good" about a job he loathed, and *sign* it, seemed to him the depth of infamy.

"I'll give it to Annie to post," said Bertha, stretching out her hand for the letter. "You go in and have tea; I'll be down in a minute, I must just tidy myself and bathe my eyes."

Eustace obeyed.

2.

As he was returning home that night he heard his name called, and turning, saw under a lamp Arthur and Marjorie West. Noting the fresh colour in their cheeks and the extreme dishevelment of Marjorie's hair he guessed that they had been walking in windy places.

"Hullo!" he said drearily. "Been for a walk?"

"We've left Francis Arthur for an hour or two because we felt we simply must have a breath of fresh air," explained Marjorie.

"But Marjorie has been yearning to get home again ever since we started," put in Arthur.

"Nothing of the kind!" Marjorie contradicted.

"We've been on the Prom. Pity the sea isn't down there in the valley. I do love the sea so."

"Be thankful for what you have, my child," Arthur advised her. "Come in and have supper, Hollins. Have we anything for supper, Marjorie?"

"Nothing whatever," admitted Marjorie frankly. "You ate it all in the middle of the day. Still, Eustace, I do think you might come in and share our frugal meal. You haven't been in to see us once since you got engaged to Bertha. Of course, I know that relatives, whether present or prospective, are an awful nuisance at times, but you needn't have deserted us quite so completely. I expect it's my fault; I ought to have asked you and Bertha to come in for the evening. You have a class on every night but Saturday, haven't you? Next Saturday I have to go to a jumble sale in the afternoon, so I shouldn't be in a fit state to entertain Bertha in the evening. But I think we have the Saturday after that free, haven't we, Arthur?"

"Yes," said Arthur. "The Broaddykes' dinner is the Saturday after that again."

"Make it the Saturday after next about seven," decided Marjorie.

"Thank you," began Eustace.

"Meanwhile come in and have supper with us now," continued Marjorie. "We've discovered a new novelist with surpassing intelligence and an awful name. Arthur found him. Of course, I mean his books, not him; I believe he himself is dead."

"He's not really new, only new to us," explained Arthur with assumed boredom.

"Does he use suspensory dots?" inquired Eustace, trying to fall in with their cheerful mood.

"Nary a one in three hundred and eighty-five pages," said Marjorie, her eyes sparkling. "Doesn't that tempt you? Do come, Eustace."

"It's awfully good of you, but I couldn't really," answered Eustace, privately wondering what Bertha would

make of "suspensory dots." "I have some work to do, you know. Books to correct."

"You sound fearfully fed-up," observed Arthur sympathetically. "I'm a bit sick of the Institute myself. I've often thought of chucking it altogether, but I daren't tell Marjorie so."

"He means he wouldn't give it up for worlds," remarked Marjorie, seizing his arm. "Come, Arthur! The infant will be howling at our desertion."

"There's a great deal of difference between voluntary and paid work," remarked Eustace bitterly, replying to Arthur, who put in two evenings a week at the Institute as an engineering demonstrator for sheer love of the work.

"Not so much—it all depends whether you like it or not," said Arthur thoughtfully.

"Arthur!" said Marjorie firmly. "Do come along. Sure you won't change your mind, Eustace? Is your temperature properly down? You oughtn't to be out in March without a coat even if you *have* got a new suit of great elegance. See you a week next Saturday; don't come till seven."

"Good-night, and take care of yourself; you don't look well," said Arthur kindly.

He turned and swung up the street with his wife; her step matched perfectly with his.

Eustace watched them. Then, cursing the day he was born, he turned and resumed his way to Derwent Terrace.

The house was dark and silent. Had Eustace consulted his own wishes he would have crept straight upstairs to bed, but he paused by Mrs. Hollins's door and said softly: "Mother!"

"Is that you, Eustace? Come in!" called Mrs. Hollins in a vigorous tone. "I'm not asleep."

Eustace entered, and gave her a suitably edited version of Robert's offer of yesterday and his to-day's acceptance of it.

"I hope I shall like the work," he concluded on a hopeless note.

"You'll like it well enough if you get good money for it," said his mother, who was overjoyed at this delightful change in her son's prospects. "It's splendid, Eustace, splendid!" She kissed him warmly. "What Lizzie said was all nonsense, of course."

"Of course," echoed Eustace.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Mrs. Hollins emphatically. "What does *she* know, pray, about lovers' affairs?"

Eustace winced and withdrew, mentally comparing his mother's philosophy of work and pay with that of Arthur. It struck him that he had seen a pithy expression of this difference between Arthur's and Mrs. Hollins's views somewhere or other in a book about industrial psychology which a colleague had lent him. He lighted the meagre incandescent in his room, found the book, and turned its pages.

"To prosper by worthy achievements is the aim of the man who has found his life-work; to get rich by luck is the object of those whose work is their prison."

Eustace swore. On the table, whither he threw the too appropriate book, he perceived the incomplete manuscript of his first novel. In a sudden spasm of anger he pulled open a drawer with one hand and rammed the mass of paper furiously beneath his underclothes; then shut the drawer with a slam which shook the dressing-table and caused its brass handles to tinkle. His own features—the features of a man who had walked into a highly respectable and generally admired building, knowing that for him it was a prison—were so repulsive to him that he jerked the badly framed mirror up on its hinges till it reflected only the discoloured ceiling and the picture-hook from which hung "A GREAT IDEAL." . . .

CHAPTER XII

AN EXCURSION INTO THE BIZARRE

1.

WILLIAM IRWELL, unlike Eustace Hollins, was a man of action ; he could not bear to sit still and do nothing, much less think about it. As he left Robert West's house on Saturday night he murmured into Isabel's ear :

" Did you say Violet was at Bournemouth ? "

Isabel's fair face took on an expression of alarm.

" No. Why ? " she asked quickly. " She's at Chipham in Surrey. She's taken a house there. Why ? Did you hear—anything—about her ? "

" Evidently it isn't the same person, " the Machiavellian William assured her.

" Ah ! " breathed Isabel, reassured.

" Did you say Chipham ? " proceeded William.

" Yes—it's a new house near the golf links, " said Isabel. " She sent father photographs and things. Fancy ! He was awfully annoyed. "

" What was the name of the house ? " inquired William gruffly.

" Oh, William ! Then you have heard, " said Isabel, distressed. She coloured and added : " Its being called ' Eversleigh ' may be just coincidence, you know, William. There are so many houses of that name nowadays. "

" Eversleigh " was the name of the house where William and Violet had spent their brief married life together.

" Possibly, " observed the astute William.

Having thus found out Violet's address without betraying his wish to do so—this concealment of his feelings was partly due to his Hudleian birth, and partly to the two

crushing disappointments he had sustained—William departed satisfied. In his own mind he had already determined on a course of action, but as he drove home he reviewed the situation and its possibilities.

It was impossible for him to turn away from Bertha, fall in love with some other suitable Hudleian girl and marry her. He knew all Bertha's faults; he knew her colossal selfishness, her crass stupidity on many points, her weakness; he realized her delicate health, in itself repugnant to a healthy man like himself; he had discovered that she did not even stir his physical emotions as strongly as some other women had done; nevertheless she was the one woman for him. He could not explain the fact, and it annoyed him to think that one girl, pretty, certainly, but not surpassingly beautiful, rich, certainly, but not as rich as himself, born in the same town as himself and therefore without the charm of novelty, and rather bad tempered than otherwise, should have the power to take his affections to herself and keep them without any apparent desire to do so on her part. Nevertheless the fact existed, and William was too well accustomed to recognizing and dealing with facts to deny the importance of this one. It was useless to advise himself: "After all, Bertha isn't your first love. You don't dote on her; the force of your passion spent itself on Violet. Go and marry some other pretty girl. There are hundreds about who would jump at the chance." He simply could not do it.

Was he to remain a bachelor, then, a man deprived of the comforts of marriage and a home? Was he to be childless? William desired to have sons to bear his name and carry on the business and inherit his wealth; he desired to have charming daughters who would grace his hearth and make good marriages. A man unmarried was but half a man! His lame brother was to marry, and not he? He was to remain at home in his mother's house, watching her grow old and die, himself old before his time? Inaction of any kind was repugnant to William, and to imagine himself separated, as it were, from the

natural destiny of the human race, unable to participate in the joys and sorrows of this worldwide state of marriage, irritated him beyond endurance. He imagined himself as a gloomy old bachelor, very rich, with nobody in particular to leave his money to—Ernest might have children, of course (William ground his teeth at the thought)—keeping an eye on Bertha's fortunes, which would probably go from bad to worse—William was a better judge of men's business capacities than Robert West, though not of their morals—perpetually lending the feeble Eustace Hollins money and extracting him from tight corners, giving Bertha's children a leg-up in the world—stupid little things they would be, with fair, dreamy faces like their father's, ridiculously lofty ideas, and an utter lack of business ability. Bertha would grow old and thin and grey with worry; and Hollins would probably die at an awkward moment, or perhaps shoot himself—he had just the woebegone sort of face to do it—and leave hopelessly entangled affairs behind for William to sort out; and William would marry the widowed Bertha and educate Hollins's children; and they would dislike him and talk endless idiotic Bolshevistic stuff up and down his house. Much good it would be marrying Bertha when the hot fire of youth was spent! A quiet autumnal happiness mingled with regret was not in William's line at all; he liked motion and action and as little thought and regret as possible.

No, he could not endure the prospect of such a life. Far better to make a clean break, cut Bertha out of his scheme altogether, and turn to the only other woman possible for him—Violet. He thought of her with a certain distaste, and wondered now at the emotion which had been roused in him by the news of her husband's death and by the receipt of her Christmas card, for since Bertha's engagement he had thought of no woman but Bertha. Still, Violet might be able to cast the old spell over him; at any rate, he knew what life was like with her, and he would not be doing her any wrong in joining his own life, which

could never be completely full and vigorous without Bertha, to hers. Of course, he could not after remarrying Violet bring her to live with him in Hudley, for Hudley would be scandalized at the sight of a man remarrying his divorced wife, and would either spoil William's happiness altogether or allow him that quiet autumnal happiness at the thought of which cold shivers ran down his back. No; he intended to cut out Hudley altogether, sell some of his businesses, remarry Violet—if she would have him—and settle in some village of Kent or Surrey whence he could run up to town every day and transact his affairs through his already existing London office. He could take up golf with more zeal than he had hitherto had time for, he could make new friends, entertain them frequently at his own house, and rear a family. Of course, it was not the life he had planned; Kent or Surrey could never take the place of Yorkshire in his heart, nor Violet, now, that of Bertha. Such a life needed enormous courage and enterprise, but it would be preferable to that of a cold, forlorn bachelor, and it would have the additional merit of keeping Violet "straight," as her family evidently doubted her ability to walk the narrow path alone.

In the course of a week or two William would be obliged to go to London to attend some wool sales. He decided that instead of returning immediately upon the conclusion of his business he would remain a little longer and call upon Violet. He debated within himself whether to write a preliminary note to his former wife, and decided against it.

2.

Some ten days later, therefore, William betook himself by taxi from his hotel in the Strand to London Bridge, a station which he did not know well and therefore disliked, and bought a ticket for Chipham. The necessary change at Purley awoke him from a long meditation on business affairs and turned his attention to the matter in hand. The train left houses and shops behind and ran through

green, gently sloping, thickly wooded country. William surveyed the just budding trees with a pleased eye; trees are scarce and scrubby in the West Riding, and in imagination he already saw himself the owner of a finely wooded estate which he would inspect on Sunday afternoons, Violet at his side. The train drew up at Chipham, and William descended on to the small, forlorn platform. On the right rose a fair-sized hill—its slope gentle compared with that of the Hudley steeps—covered with thick woods; on the left a portion of a golf course displayed itself on another hillside; and a winding grey road led to several scattered red brick houses, all very new, compounded of gables, imitation cross-beams, small windows and peculiar shaped doors. William inquired for Eversleigh, and was directed to follow the grey road until it curved round towards the golf course; the house he required stood almost upon the links.

William was not particularly fond of country roads except when he was driving a good car over them. The afternoon was grey and still, and Chipham did not look very inviting. He toiled up the grey road, rather sick at heart, and presently came to a newly painted white gate on which was printed in old English lettering “Eversleigh.” Violet’s home, like most of the Chipham dwellings, was of new red brick, and it had more than its share of round windows and steep gables. William thought it rather smart and *distingué*, so different from the Hudley houses built almost without exception of stone. He rang the bell, and an extremely smart parlourmaid appeared, whose outfit included a large cap with ribbons, a minute apron, silk stockings, and high-heeled shoes. He remembered that Violet had always been something of a *grande dame* in her housekeeping; he remembered, also, that this trait of hers had occasionally irritated him, brought up as he had been in the solid but inelegant comfort of Hudley.

“Mrs. Bollam?” he said, stumbling over the unfamiliar name.

The parlourmaid led him into a drawing-room at the

back of the house, the windows of which looked over the golf links. The room was furnished expensively in the very newest style, with a delicate wallpaper and bright splashes of colour in unexpected places. A bright wood fire burned in the pseudo-artistic grate; bowls and vases of expensive, deep-coloured flowers were dotted about on small tables; the general effect was lavish and, to William's bourgeois eye, artistocratic in a stagey way.

"What name shall I say, sir?" asked the parlourmaid in the—to his ear—insincere polite tones of the South.

"Irwell," muttered William, blushing.

The maid clicked away on her high heels.

William sat down on a very comfortable couch and began to feel extremely miserable. What frightfully bad taste on his part was this unexpected call! Why had he not written to Violet, or at least communicated with her through his solicitors? His present action was preposterous, and he would probably pay for it by an appalling scene with his former wife. He remembered a scene of passion and hysteria to which Violet had once treated him on the subject of papering the bathroom, and thought that he had now let himself in for a really tremendous half-hour, during which his whole being would be stirred to its depths and every emotion he possessed would be played upon by Violet's skilful hand. He tried to nerve himself in preparation for the harrowing scene; his mouth felt dry, he moistened his lips nervously, suddenly remembered himself as a curly-haired child, and thought it hard that well-intentioned human beings should have so much to suffer, tried again to steady his mind by recalling details of the business transactions he had just completed, and realized that at the first word of remorse from Violet, the first tear—his heart contracted with pain at the mere thought of it—he should hold her convulsively to him and bury his contorted face in her scented hair; not from any particular love for Violet, though old affection, old intimacy, old associations were wielding upon him their customary power, but because he sensed the overwhelming tragedy of their meeting.

But perhaps Violet would be so outraged by his disregard of the decencies that she would not receive him. This thought brought him disappointment but also a certain relief, and when the door opened he looked round almost eagerly in expectation of the maid returning with a cold dismissing lie. It was, however, his wife who entered.

At the sight of her all the bitterness of her desertion rose up into William's throat and choked him. For she was just the same as when she had lived with him in Hudley; her fair hair, waved and scented, heaped high upon her head in old-fashioned "Empire" style; her rather prominent, grey eyes, her heavy lids, her long nose, the little blue mark beside her mouth which showed where a mole had once been removed, her irresponsible gay smile, her delicate, carefully arranged complexion, her long, full body, beautifully but outrageously clad in fashionably indecent grey, her pink nails, pointed and polished, her forefinger graced by a huge diamond ring—all were just as he had known and owned them. It was indeed impossible for Violet to change, nor on the other hand could custom stale her infinite variety, for she personified the elusive and eternal feminine.

She advanced. For one horrible moment William feared that she expected him to kiss her, but she changed her mind and offered him her hand in a regal manner.

"Well, William!" she said in her high, soft tones. "This is a surprise; it is really. I could hardly believe when the maid told me. 'Irwell,' I said. 'Never! You must be mistaken.' But she was positive it was Irwell. 'Was he lame?' I asked her, thinking it might be Ernest, you know, William, on business; but when she said no, I knew it must be you. Of course, nobody here knows *anything* about my having lived in Hudley."

William cleared his throat and tried to think of something brilliant to say, but could not. In Violet's presence he always behaved like an unsophisticated fool; and now it was in vain that he reminded himself of his real business ability, of his quick grasp of politics, of his capacity for

hard work and clever organization ; he felt like a schoolboy and blushed like an *ingénue*.

His wife waved him to a chair.

“ And how ever did you manage to find the place ? ” she asked in soft, excited wonderment. “ It really is rather difficult. Did you come to Chipham or to Woldenhurst ? The postal address is Chipham, but Woldenhurst Station is a much easier walk ; the road is in ever so much better condition, so Mr. De Blammont says. It’s a pity they don’t alter the postal address ; what do you think, William ? ”

“ I found Eversleigh quite easily, ” said William grimly, with a slight accent on the name.

“ I expect you think it’s too bad of me to call it by that name, William, ” said Violet, the colour rising into her rounded cheeks. “ But really, do you know, I couldn’t think of another name. I simply couldn’t. The man stood there in the garden, you know, waiting for the name ”—she giggled softly and opened her eyes wide—“ and I couldn’t think of one ! The painter, I mean, who painted the gate. So I just—laughed—you know, and said, ‘ How about Eversleigh ? ’ And he asked me whether I wished it spelt with a ‘ y ’ or an ‘ igh ’—the people here are so polite, William, so different from the North-Country folk. They’re so blunt, aren’t they, William ? And then such a horrid accent. ”

If William had expected his wife to weep, to cast herself at his feet and sob out her repentance for the wrong she had done him, or even to be seriously embarrassed, his expectations were disappointed. A very slight shade of uneasiness in her manner was all that could be detected. This was her own house, bought and furnished with her own money left her by her mother, and she obviously felt that she was indebted to nobody and was not called upon to tolerate any criticism. William made a few inquiries about her late husband’s people—who lived in Scotland—in order to keep the conversation going ; then the smart maid entered and began preparations for tea by opening out a low and beautifully carved wooden stand.

"You'll have some tea, William?" murmured Violet, adjusting the stand's legs to suit her convenience. Her tone precluded the possibility of any long stay on William's part. The maid vanished and reappeared with a large round brass tray, full of delicate china and gleaming silver, which was fitted on to the wooden stand. In spite of himself William was impressed by the South Country *chic* of Violet's establishment. The smart maid minced out.

"You're not in mourning, then?" said William in a strained tone, remembering that Violet was a five-months' widow.

"Oh, William, grey *is* mourning," said Violet pettishly. "Besides, I think those old-fashioned customs so silly, don't you? I'm sure dear Alan would *never* have wished me to look ugly for *his* sake. I don't think there's any harm in wearing grey, do you?"

She looked at him in earnest inquiry, and William knew from former experience that her expression was genuine. To Violet small things and great were of equal value and importance, and she quite sincerely wanted his opinion on the matter—which, once received, in a second she would have forgotten.

"I suppose not," he said lamely, agonized by the improbability of the situation—a divorced wife consulting her first husband on the propriety of wearing mourning for her second. His brain reeled; he thought he must be dreaming—it could not really be William Henry Irwell, a hard-headed ordinary Hudley manufacturer, who sat thus in the drawing-room of a wife who had deserted him, and calmly nibbled at a scone.

"Do you live here by yourself?" he inquired with disapproval.

"No, of course not, I have a companion—such a sweet old thing," replied Violet with genuine enthusiasm, helping herself to a second cup of tea. "Really, she's a darling—so old-fashioned, you know, and dainty. And how is Bertha West?"

This sudden change of topic made William start and colour, and reminded him that Violet was by no means

always a fool. What had she heard? What had Isabel written to her?

"Oh, Bertha?" he said calmly. "She's engaged to a young Hollins—don't think you know him. He's a grandson of Institute Hollins, you know. Clever chap—a schoolmaster."

The mere mention of the Hudleian names gave him a sudden acute nostalgia for Hudley and his own simple uncomplicated North. However, he was not a man easily turned from his purpose by any mere passing sentiment, so he continued firmly but with an undercurrent of weariness:

"I came up to London for the wool sales, and I just thought . . . I would see what Chipham was like. I shall probably be up again in May."

"I might meet you in town for lunch, William," offered Violet at once.

William with polite firmness arranged details; but her haste had given him an unpleasant impression. It was not prompted by any yearning to see him, but by a desire to keep him from visiting her again at Chipham. He wondered a little, and for the first time it occurred to him that Violet might oppose the idea of their remarriage. He sighed and continued:

"Is that a gramophone you have over there? It looks a good one."

"Oh yes, it's a very good one," said Violet. She crossed the room towards the gramophone, and William had the opportunity of observing her ultra-fashionable patent leather shoes, slashed up in every direction to reveal her faultless silk stockings, and reflecting the fire-light in their gleaming surface.

"What money she must spend!" thought William, who had paid Violet's bills in past years and knew just how much shoes and silken hose cost. "She'll never be able to live on her own income. It took her all her time to live on mine. Wonder how much that fellow left her."

He felt a return of sympathy for his wife ; in the past her lavish and unthinking expenditure of his money had held a certain appeal for the romantic and chivalrous side of him, though at times it had irritated him profoundly.

" We use it for dancing a great deal," explained Violet, displaying the mechanism of the gramophone. " We have a great deal of dancing here—such splendid dancers ! Some of the men, really ! You've no idea in the North ! We have had two classes every week, and practised nearly every evening. I *love* the new dances so ; so much variety, you know—I can't bear to waste a second of the music ! No ! The minute the music begins I want to begin to dance, and if there isn't a man handy I'd just as soon dance with a girl !" The genuine amazement at herself displayed in this statement was a complete revelation of Violet's character. " No use waiting for men, I always say. I simply go *mad* when I'm dancing."

" Is there some nice society here, then ?" asked William, unpleasantly conscious of the Yorkshire burr in his speech.

" Oh *yes* !" cried Violet with her soft giggle. " Such nice people ! Not a bit like the Hudley people—so refined. Their manners are so much more polished. Oh, I do like them so much better. Mr. De Blammont is such a charming man—oldish, you know, with grey hair, so distinguished. And then besides there are the——"

She ran on in a long catalogue of strange names. William did not hear them ; his brain was busy with the suspicion that Violet wished to ensnare and marry this distinguished gentleman with the foreign name.

" Who is this Mr. De Blammont ?" he asked abruptly.

Her answering soft giggle told him all that he feared to know ; his suspicions became certainties.

" He's a stockbroker," explained Violet. " He lives just across the road—such a charming man. *Quite* English, of course, in spite of his name ; his family have lived in England for generations. He's a widower—he has a boy at Harrow."

And suddenly again William felt overwhelmingly homesick for Hudley and the North. What was he doing there in that alien exotic room? He was weary of its meretricious furniture, weary beyond description of its once enthralling hostess, now so heartless-seeming, so utterly callous and irresponsible that merely to look at her artificial French-noblesse face made William feel sick. What had he to do with De Blammonts and theatrical-looking parlourmaids, and glaring striped cushions covered with artificial fruit, and people who spoke slurred Southern English and couldn't manage a business—he was convinced—to save their lives? He was a stranger in a strange land here, and he felt as homesick as a child for the cold winds and harsh truthful speech of his native town. Better a thousand times bachelordom amongst his own people whom he understood, than marriage with the foreign-seeming Violet in this land of polite insincerity where a divorced woman could meet her wronged husband with banalities about a gramophone. He had been a fool to come here; the episode was absurd, out of proportion, gaudily theatrical against the sober background of his common-sense life in Hudley. He would, of course, keep his appointment with Violet in May, but after that he would never see her again; and certainly he would never reveal to anyone his farcical—or melodramatic, William was not sure which—action in visiting the Chipham Eversleigh. The comfortable thought of Bertha flooded his heart with relief, and the privilege of playing the rich bachelor friend to herself and her children seemed good and joyful after the uneasy torment of intercourse with Violet.

On the plea of catching his train—though he knew perfectly well that he had missed that evening's Northern express and would have to wait till morning for another—he left almost immediately. Violet's farewell was gay and cordial, with the cordiality which she lavished on every man of her acquaintance.

William slammed the white-painted gate of Eversleigh

behind him to relieve the bitterness of his heart. He had torn open an old wound and all the pain and the dull ache of it had been to no purpose. In due course Violet would become Mrs. De Blammont—what a musical comedy name! And how she had received him! What petty cowardice they had both displayed in an interview which should have been emotional, momentous, at the least sincere. And there was no pretty, comforting, ordinary Bertha to soothe away his pain, he reminded himself bitterly; she belonged to that dreaming fool of a Eustace Hollins.

A heavy drizzle was now falling, and as William stumbled down the muddy grey road he felt like a small child whose two favourite toys have been broken beyond repair. He waited, as it seemed endlessly, in the wet grey twilight for a train, and when at last one came he cast himself gloomily into one corner of a carriage, and, as the train plodded slowly towards London, gazed with uninterested eyes upon the undulating landscape blotted by the now heavy rain and fading into a cheerless dark, and fell to thinking bitter and cynical thoughts of women.

As, however, William had always opposed higher education for girls, disliked the idea of women taking any part in municipal and political life, avoided Marjorie West like the plague and ridiculed her type, lavished all his youthful compliments and flatteries upon girls like Bertha West and Isabel Huntley, and set the seal of his approval on that kind of girl by marrying Violet and making her the mistress of his half-million—as these things were so, his cynicism was a trifle out of place, for it is hardly fair to carp at what you yourself have helped to create.

Such also was the man's obtuseness that he did not perceive that the difference between Violet and Bertha was one of degree only and not of kind—Violet going the whole hog and Bertha timidly stopping halfway down that animal.

Obtuse or not, however, he suffered.

CHAPTER XIII

MISERY OF BERTHA

1.

THE morning after he had signed away his birthright Eustace awoke early, after a series of fretful dozes which had left him unrefreshed. The events of the previous day came back to him with a sickening rush, and he mentally confirmed his last night's decision to attempt authorship no more. Nay, further, he would read no more—taking “read” in the sense of “peruse serious literature”—for what good had his reading done him? This nightmare determination was, no doubt, partly due to his Saturday's malaria, for his head still swam when he rose to write to his friend in Edinburgh and thus make an end of all his previous ambitions. He savagely declined to take any notice of his feelings of giddiness and unease; such things belonged to the past gentle and yielding—“namby-pamby” was the word he used—Eustace Hollins, who was now dead and buried as securely as his manuscript was buried at the bottom of a drawer. For a moment he thought of taking the offending mass of paper and giving it a more effective interment in a field, but rejected this plan as too sentimental and unworthy of the new practical Eustace.

Descending, he found Lizzie struggling with the kitchen range, and with a new assumption of masculine uninterestedness left her to struggle with it alone, while he retired into the dining-room and wrote a pseudo-jocular letter to his Edinburgh friend. He then went out and posted it, and returned to the house looking very fierce and determined, inwardly convinced that he had left his old self behind for ever.

But it was not easy to cast off habits so deep-rooted as were his literary ones, and the wrench of parting proved continuous and painful. Eustace found, for example, that when his mother had been unsympathetic in the past, he had been accustomed to forget her tyranny in the pursuit of adjectives which should accurately describe her peculiar character; that when Lizzie's restlessness or Daisy's hysteria had mocked his own versatility and sensitiveness, he had been wont to wonder meditatively whether any novelist had yet succeeded in depicting a family of characters who were really related and who showed their relationship by those irritating similarities with a difference which were so marked in his own family circle. He had also wondered whether he might not be the first novelist to do it properly . . . But now these thoughts had to be banished, and nothing was left him but the perplexing realities : Mrs. Hollins, Lizzie, Daisy. Then again, when things had gone wrong in his classes at the Institute—as they so often did—he had been in the habit of consoling himself amid the howling uproar of his badly-managed pupils with the thought of the biting realism—or the wistful tenderness—with which he would one day write about teaching. But now he must not think in this way; rude and undisciplined and ignorant children must be regarded as the fruits of his own past incapacity rather than as the material for future triumphs in fiction. And it was the same with everything else. The ugly varnished paper in his bedroom, the Principal's portentous scowl, the biting March winds, the tiresome spluttering of his fountain pen, all became unpleasant facts which had to be faced, instead of the different coloured strands of a glowing pattern which one day he meant to weave.

The consequence of these continual disillusionments was a nervous irritability which stamped a look of suffering on Eustace's face, pulled down the corners of his mouth, and made his speech so biting and abrupt that Bertha really did not know what to make of him.

“Aren't you glad that you're going to join Robert?”

she asked him timidly one day ; and was rewarded by a furious glare which frightened and perplexed her. If he were always to be as bad tempered and uncertain of mood as he had been the last week or two, married life, she felt, with him would be intolerable.

In spite of his daily growing misery Eustace was still adhering to his absurd decision on the Saturday after William Irwell's interview with his wife, the Saturday upon which Eustace was by arrangement to call at Beech Lea to escort Bertha to Arthur's house for the evening. His own feelings about this visit were a source of trouble and perplexity to Eustace. The fact was that he did not wish to see Arthur and Marjorie, and he felt ashamed of this ingratitude towards old and tried friends. Marjorie represented a type of educated woman of whose existence he, engaged to Bertha, did not wish to be reminded. Arthur knew that Eustace was, as Bertha put it, " joining Robert," and he would perhaps inquire whether Eustace meant to give up writing altogether. In any case he would remind Eustace of books and of his previous ambitions. No! decidedly Eustace did not wish to spend the evening in Prince's Road Terrace.

The maid who opened the Beech Lea door seemed rather surprised at the earliness of Eustace's arrival ; she informed him that Miss Bertha was not yet ready, and showed him into the empty study. Eustace picked up a voluminous Sunday-school report belonging to Mr. West and turned its pages restlessly.

" I shall be a pillar of the chapel before I know where I am," he mused miserably.

His head ached, and angry feelings clashed in his heart,

Bertha entered the room elaborately garbed and wrapped in that opera cloak whose fur had once thrilled Eustace's adventurous fingers.

" Aren't you going to put anything on your head?" inquired Eustace, surveying her with cold disfavour. " It's a cold night, and it's quite fifteen minutes' walk from here to Arthur's."

“ Oh ! ” said Bertha in surprise, pausing in her movement to embrace him. “ But we aren’t going to Arthur’s. Didn’t Daisy tell you? She can’t have understood what I said. She was just getting on to a tram when I saw her in town this morning, and I told her to tell you—but, of course, she couldn’t have heard what I said or she would have told you,” she added hastily, seeing anger gathering upon Eustace’s brow and attributing it to her unintended disparagement of Daisy’s abilities as a messenger. “ We’re going to the theatre—Gladys and mother and Robert and Isabel and you and me. Isabel took the tickets yesterday ; it’s the anniversary of her wedding day or something. I rang up Marjorie this morning and she said it didn’t matter at all.”

Eustace crimsoned. From experience he knew, as Bertha did not, that in a small household the late cancellation of an engagement means much waste of time and money. Also to cancel her acceptance of one brother’s invitation in order to go out with another was a too callous indication of where Bertha’s preference lay. Arthur was Eustace’s friend, yet Bertha had made these alterations in their joint arrangements without consulting Eustace and without troubling much to inform him of them. If Eustace had wanted to go to Arthur’s these facts would have annoyed him considerably even while he submitted to them ; but as he did *not* want to go and was ashamed of himself for this feeling, they infuriated him to such a pitch that he felt he could not submit to them. The blood drummed in his temples, his throat felt thick, he lost control of his already exasperated temper and stutted in a fury :

“ I shan’t go.”

“ How do you mean? ” inquired Bertha, genuinely puzzled and alarmed.

“ I shall not go to the theatre,” announced Eustace loudly. He stalked towards the door. “ You’ve no right to make arrangements like that at the last minute. I shan’t go.” He opened the door and marched out into the hall.

"But, Eustace!" pleaded Bertha, following him out, her eyes wide with terror at this unprecedented incident. "What do you mean? You can't go to Arthur's now. They're not expecting us. Robert's invited you—he's bought the tickets, you know."

This was the last straw.

"If you imagine, Bertha," began Eustace in a loud tone, without the least idea how he was going to finish his sentence. "If you imagine——" He stopped, choked by a variety of emotions, and began to put on his coat.

"Eustace!" moaned Bertha, bursting into sobs. "How can you be so unkind? Robert will be so angry—and mother too. We'll go to Arthur's another day. You can't really mean you're going away *now* without seeing anybody?"

Eustace took up his stick. At the bottom of his heart he was genuinely surprised at his own firmness, but he also felt that if he did not get out of Beech Lea soon something terrible might happen. Perhaps this was how poor Daisy felt when she sometimes so inexplicably burst into tears? This thought brought a pang of sympathy which softened his face and caused Bertha to exclaim imperiously, placing herself between him and the door: "You can't go like this, Eustace! Don't be so silly."

Eustace's face immediately hardened. "Be careful, Bertha!" he warned her, stepping forward with so menacing an air that Bertha's fortitude gave way. She sank down on one of the imitation Jacobean hall chairs and wept loudly.

"You've been so horrid this last fortnight, Eustace!" she sobbed. "So horrid. I don't know what's been the matter with you, I don't really. You've been so cross! And snappy! Even mother has noticed it. And what she'll say now I'm sure I can't think. I hope you won't be silly like this when we're married."

Eustace went out of the house, and by a great effort of will managed to refrain from banging the front door. He strode off out of the gates and along the streets through the

March twilight feeling as though Fate had been driving a harrow over his heart. Perplexed and irritated, not knowing exactly why he felt irritated nor against whom his irritation was directed, he experienced an intense desire to destroy something, to smash two or three dozen glasses or tear the legs from some inoffensive chair. Instinctively avoiding the main roads he tramped along between rows of small depressing houses which he did not remember ever to have seen before, passionately cursing Bertha and Robert and the whole of the West family—even Arthur was included in the general ban because he had permitted Bertha to grow up to her present self—hating himself, and despising the whole human race for its innate meanness and insignificance.

“And now I don’t even know where I am,” he exclaimed, bitterly resenting the unfamiliarity of the narrow and desolate streets. He halted, and looking about, perceived in the near distance the flat roof and many pillars of the Public Library. “I suppose I’d better make for it,” he grumbled sulkily, his passion already somewhat assuaged. He made a *détour* and presently found himself in the rear of the building.

The windows stood open, the white-sheathed lights shone out into the falling dusk, the books ranged so neatly in their polished shelves had a mellow comfortable glow; as it was Saturday evening the library was fairly full, and the crowd of readers moved and paused and moved again, plucking eagerly at desirable books or lured on by the unknown charms of the next shelf. A bearded man manœuvred a pair of steps into position, and solemnly mounted to the top shelf of Philosophy.

A gentle touch seemed to soothe Eustace’s harassed mind; he entered the building, placed his stick in the familiar round stand, took down a modern poetical drama, and, propping himself against the edge of a bookcase, became immersed in the author’s beautiful cadences. Peace descended into his soul.

At the end of the first act he paused and looked about,

savouring to the full his regained content. Had he really ever been so insane as to imagine that he could give up reading and writing? Preposterous! He settled himself more comfortably against the bookcase and was about to begin the second act when his eye fell casually upon the clock, and he remembered Bertha and her theatre party.

Good heavens! Was it possible that he, the mild and cultured Eustace, had been such an utter boor as to leave that silly little Bertha dropping ineffectual tears upon her own hall table? And for such a trifling cause! He coloured with shame, and glanced at the clock again. Since he had left Beech Lea his feelings had swung from Pole to Pole, but they had accomplished this long-distance voyage in less than half an hour. Suppose he hastened penitently to Bertha and took her to the theatre after all? They would be too late for the beginning of the performance, of course, but not outrageously late considering his own known unpunctuality. Suddenly making up his mind he sprang towards the exit, rushed from the building—characteristically leaving his stick in the stand—and ran along the streets towards Beech Lea. Striking Prince's Road, he looked about anxiously for a tram, and perceived instead Jenkinson driving the Wests' empty car up the road, probably returning from the theatre. Eustace stepped boldly into the road and accosted him.

"Been to the theatre?" he asked jerkily, panting from his run. "Miss Bertha go?" he continued on receiving an affirmative reply.

"No, sir," said Jenkinson respectfully. "Only Mrs. West and Miss Gladys. Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

"I expect Miss Bertha's still waiting for me—I'm shockingly late," panted Eustace, thinking that this remark had a quite Machiavellian subtlety.

Naturally Jenkinson at once opened the car door for Eustace to enter; he did so and was soon speeding up the road towards Beech Lea. Once there Eustace bounded into the house, told the maid in loud tones that he was afraid he was frightfully late, and ran halfway up the

stairs to meet Bertha, who on hearing his voice descended in alarm from her bedroom, whither she had repaired in a passion of mortification and misery on Eustace's departure. Eustace dragged her hastily into the dining-room and shut the door.

"I'm exceedingly sorry I was so bad tempered, Bertha," he began breathlessly. "Do forgive me. Say you forgive me." He put one arm round her waist and kissed her unresponsive cheek. "We can go to the theatre now, we shan't be so very late, Jenkinson's at the door. I came up with him."

"I don't know what mother will say," began Bertha, who was really exhausted by the emotional strain of the evening.

"I'll explain everything to her," said Eustace with generous firmness, urging her towards the door. "Come along now. Where's that pretty cloak you were wearing before?"

Bertha surveyed him distastefully. She herself thought the cloak rather old-fashioned, as it had been bought in the previous season—but Eustace's ideas on dress were always simply absurd. How ridiculous of him to rush away in a rage and then turn up again within the hour begging for forgiveness, after spoiling her evening's enjoyment and upsetting her mother and sister! He was so incalculable, so strange, so unlike other people; you never knew what he would do next. Life with him would be one long perplexity. She sighed.

The two emerged into the hall; the parlourmaid had, it appeared, already fetched Bertha's cloak from upstairs, and she now put it round the girl's shoulders. Jenkinson had turned the car round, and was now standing respectfully by its open door. They climbed in and drove off.

Bertha's pale cheeks still showed traces of tears, and her body drooped dejectedly. She had been obliged to admit to Mrs. West that Eustace and herself had been quarrelling, and that Eustace was annoyed because they were not going to Arthur's as had been arranged. Mrs. West's

sympathy had been tempered with hinted displeasure, and the disapproval of Gladys had been outspoken. Now Bertha would have to explain to her family this sudden return and repentance on Eustace's part, and to her it was inexplicable.

"We'll go to Arthur's next Saturday," she suggested tremulously.

"Unfortunately, dear, we can't go next Saturday," replied Eustace, tenderly harmonious. "Arthur and Marjorie are dining with the Broaddykes next Saturday. But we will go the Saturday after that. I'm sorry I can't get away early enough during the week." He observed the wan misery of Bertha's face with remorse. "Are you cold, dear? You look very pale," he continued affectionately, and drew the rug round her knees and put his arm through hers. To himself he thought: "What a poor, weak, silly little thing she is! No character at all. She requires the utmost consideration on my part. I almost believe," he meditated, glancing again at the tears just trembling upon Bertha's long dark lashes, "I almost believe I'm falling in love with her."

Meanwhile, Bertha, yielding her arm to his, thought: "He's so *strange*—he's so different from other people. I can't bear him. I simply can't bear him."

2.

A fortnight later, in the early evening, Bertha and Eustace mounted the steps of Arthur's small house. It was now mid-April, spring was coming, the days were lengthening, the air was warm and bright, the small wretched trees planted along one side of Prince's Road Terrace and protected by tight iron railings had fat green buds on them which could almost be seen uncurling, and wallflowers and red tulips brightened Arthur's minute front garden. Bertha's health always suffered during the spring months, and she was also suffering, though she did not quite realize it as yet, from her enforced intimacy with a man who was in every respect the opposite of what she

desired him to be. Her distaste for Eustace had grown daily since the theatre episode, and to-night she felt nervous and listless and inclined to weep for no particular reason. Melancholy dragged down the corners of her pretty mouth and fatigue drooped her eyelids; while Eustace rang the bell she leaned languidly against the wooden pillar of Arthur's tiny verandah and wondered whether Jenkinson could be induced by telephone to bring the car round at eleven o'clock to take her home.

Eustace observed the languid droop of her body, and felt, as usual, sorry for her. He was himself also feeling tired, for the Institute examinations were approaching and he was overwhelmed with tiresome routine work. At the end of long days of work, to which the uncertain weather lent an added tedium, Eustace was expected—by his mother and Mrs. West, if not by Bertha—to repair to Beech Lea to see his lady-love for an hour or so. Returning home between twelve and one, dead beat, he cast himself into bed, lighted a cigarette, propped himself comfortably up on his pillows and wrote a page or two, for in the reaction against his fortnight's abstention from writing he had determined that nothing but extinction should put a period or even form an interruption to his author's labours. This burning of the candle at both ends, even for a brief fortnight, made him surprisingly thin and gave him an old and wearied look; consequently he sympathized with Bertha's evident fatigue.

"Tired?" he asked on a note of commiseration.

Bertha nodded.

"One of my shoes hurts," she confided to him.

"Bad luck," sympathized Eustace. "Why not take it off and borrow some of Marjorie's for the evening?"

"Her feet are *miles* larger than mine!" exclaimed Bertha with contempt.

"Are they?" murmured Eustace stupidly, while the other side of his tired brain mechanically registered "exaggerated expression" as one of Bertha's characteristics.

It suddenly occurred to Bertha, as of late it had often done, that presently she would have to live upon terms of

intimacy with Eustace; her shoes would become familiar objects to him—and also their price—and she would know by heart his ties and shirts and have to mend his socks. At the thought an immense weariness seized her; she did not feel equal to beginning an absolutely fresh life with a man who was a comparative stranger to her—for Eustace perplexed and disturbed her, she did not understand his ways of thought, and never knew beforehand what he would like or dislike.

“How long they are before they open the door!” she said impatiently. It transpired that Eustace had rung the wrong bell—the electric bell was out of order and Arthur had affixed a temporary one to the door. On this Eustace played what Bertha considered an undignified tune, and almost immediately the youthful Emmeline opened the door. She smiled at them welcomingly and gazed with awe at Eustace, for she attended cookery classes at the Institute twice a week and knew Eustace for one of the Olympian staff.

Marjorie appeared at the head of the stairs clad in a large white apron with her sleeves rolled up.

“You’re frightfully early,” she told them frankly. “I said seven. I’m just bathing Bonnie; Arthur’s in the cellar developing films. Come upstairs, Bertha, and take your things off. I won’t kiss you because I’ve got a fearful cold. Eustace, you’ll find plenty of books on the table, or you can go downstairs and stir up Arthur if you like. Don’t go into that room, Bee,” she suddenly whispered urgently. “You’ll wake baby if you do.”

Bertha took off her hat and coat and repaired to the bathroom, where Bonnie, enveloped in a large white towel, was supposedly being dried and really superintending the aquatic adventures of two small celluloid dolls carefully clad in bathing costumes made from snippets of Bonnie’s last new frock.

“I’m sorry there isn’t a chair for you, Bertha,” observed Marjorie. “Sit on the edge of the bath. Now, scamp, that’s quite enough; you’ve got a cold and you

mustn't play long to-night." She manipulated a woollen garment and fastened buttons, and Bonnie emerged from the towel clad in a nightdress and a blue dressing-gown. The child looked shyly at Bertha, whom she did not often see, and inquired where Auntie Gladys was. "Gladys put her to bed last Saturday when I was out, you know," explained Marjorie. She picked up Bonnie and carried her off to her cot, Bertha following for lack of anything else to do.

Bonnie, her round cheeks warmly pink from her bath, fixed her bright eyes on Bertha, whom she evidently regarded as a pleasing but rare phenomenon, and observed :

"I stayed with you once, didn't I? And you bathed me, and I thought there were pussy-cats on the wall." She giggled at the thought of this shocking blunder on her part, and then inquired : "Has Auntie Bertha come by herself?"

"No, sweetheart, Uncle Eustace brought her," replied her mother, who was folding up small garments and turning socks inside out.

Bonnie's bright eyes grew brighter.

"I want him to come upstairs and say good-night to me," she said in a small imploring voice.

"What a tyrant you are!" observed Marjorie, surveying her small daughter affectionately.

Bonnie drooped her head and smiled a small shy smile. "I want him to come," she persisted softly. "He used often to come. Cuddly wants to see him."

Marjorie went out of the room, and leaning over the banisters called out softly : "Bonnie wants to say good-night to Uncle Eustace."

Eustace hastily dropped the book he was reading and bounded upstairs. He was quite familiar with the location of Bonnie's cot and was soon beside it. That small person put her flannel-clad arms round his neck in a warm hug and kissed him; she was usually chary of her embraces, and did not dispense them freely, but Eustace

as the healer of Cuddly had an abiding place in her heart. She presently released him with a sigh of content, and gave a deprecating glance towards Bertha, as if she feared her disapproval. Eustace observed the glance and was amused, and a tenderness towards Bertha filled his heart, since their quarrel and reconciliation a very willing vessel for this emotion. Why should he not rejoice in the prospect of a household of his own, a pretty wife, and children who might be just as lovable as Bonnie?

He seated himself beside the cot and began to converse seriously with the child about the habits of the ducks in the park.

Bertha rose abruptly and left the room. The sight of Eustace kissing Bonnie and talking charming baby talk to her had created in her a physical revulsion which terrified her. She realized that she simply would not be able to endure to be the mother of Eustace's children. It was not only that she objected to Eustace as a husband, but she feared that children who looked at her with Eustace's grey eyes or smiled at her with Eustace's finely-curved mouth would rouse in her hate rather than love. In spite of her efforts to dismiss the subject from her mind, again and again the picture of small boys with Eustace's long fingers and dreamy enthusiastic face rose before her eyes and nauseated her. It would be intolerable, she considered with a pang, to have peculiar "clever" children whose thoughts she would be unable to understand—who would read poetry and make weird inconclusive remarks and change their minds abruptly without cause, just as Eustace did. Bertha hurried downstairs and sank into an arm-chair, feeling suddenly weak and hysterical and unable to go on with life. Her hands shook, and she felt so utterly lonely and comfortless that the entry of Marjorie, minus the apron, was a relief.

Arthur emerged from the cellar and began enthusiastically to describe his photographs, in which Bertha felt not the slightest interest. Presently Eustace descended.

"Bonnie is upset because you didn't say good-night to

her, Bertha," he told her, evidently expecting her at once to go upstairs.

"Oh, Eustace!" began Bertha fretfully. "Really I——"

"Don't trouble," said Arthur quickly, his face suddenly dark with anger. He had his full share of the West temper, he adored his little daughter and disliked his youngest sister, and that Bertha should not want to humour the child's affectionate caprice infuriated him.

"I'll go," said Bertha, rather alarmed by his tone. She rose.

"Pray *don't*," said Arthur with emphasis. He took her arm and reseated her none too gently, then left the room to visit Bonnie himself.

There was an awkward pause. Marjorie coloured and looked into the fire, and Eustace moved restlessly in his chair. (His restlessness was by now proverbial in the West family and a source of profound irritation to Mr. West.) Bertha felt more than ever inclined to burst into tears, and dislike for Eustace gained ground irresistibly in her heart.

"When does Gladys go to London?" asked Marjorie to relieve the tension.

"Wednesday," replied Bertha.

"Lucky girl!" commented Marjorie with a sigh.

As soon as Arthur re-entered the room his wife said hastily: "Let's play some foolish game—Hearts or Newmarket or something."

They embarked seriously upon "Slippery Ann," a game which amused Eustace and which Bertha considered the last word in puerility.

At the beginning of her engagement Bertha had often felt annoyed with Eustace for his occasional bouts of absolute indifference to her presence—he really often behaved as if he had forgotten she was there—but lately he had been affectionate and considerate. To-night he was even more so than usual, and when he said, "It's your turn now, dear," or inquired with a twinkle, "How

are the shoes?" Bertha dug her nails into the palm of her hand and felt an unconquerable aversion to him—she hated his harmonious un-Hudleian voice, the cleft in his chin, his grey eyes, his rumpled fair hair, his thick fair eyebrows humorously arched, his long and well-shaped hands; everything about him which was admirable she loathed with a force and bitterness which horrified her.

"It's because of this sudden warm weather that I feel tired and cross," she tried to persuade herself. "Of course I'm very fond of Eustace really. It's too late, now, to discover that I'm not."

Her voice shook with hatred as she replied to Eustace's suggestions as to what they should do together to-morrow afternoon.

3.

Gladys West was going to London on the following Wednesday to spend a fortnight with her cousin Edith, Mr. Irvine's daughter. The husband of Edith's sister-in-law had recently died in Africa, and Edith's husband had journeyed out there, partly to benefit his own health by the sea voyage and partly to put his sister's affairs in order and escort her to England. Edith had remained at home and had invited various people to stay with her at different times to keep her company during his absence.

On Sunday the weather changed abruptly, the glass went down, the temperature fell, and a biting north-east wind tore over Hudley, bringing with it swirling showers of hail and sleet. On Monday Mrs. West was obliged to retire to bed with a bad attack of asthma. Gladys wished to postpone her London visit, but Mrs. West was determined that she should do nothing of the kind.

"You have so few pleasures, love," she said firmly. "Bertha can look after me for once."

Gladys was dubious of Bertha's ability to nurse her mother; however, she did not press her genuine desire to remain at home, but packed her trunks, collected by tele-

phone numerous messages from Marjorie—who had been Edith's intimate friend for many a long year—and prepared to travel to London by the morning express.

On Wednesday morning, shortly before the taxi was due to arrive—the car was broken down—Gladys went upstairs to her mother's bedroom to say good-bye to her. Her trunks were already labelled, and stood in the hall. She stooped over the bed and kissed her mother.

"I hope you'll have a good time, love," said Mrs. West in a quiet husky voice. "By the way, you didn't ring up Marjorie again this morning, did you? I feel worried about that heavy cold she has; she doesn't take care of herself as she should, and these April winds are so cold sometimes. Ring up, love; or tell Bertha to do so; I feel worried."

"Yes, I'll tell Bertha," said Gladys dutifully. "I meant to telephone myself, but it slipped my memory, what with packing and one thing and another."

At this moment Bertha entered the room, rather out of breath with running up the stairs, and said: "Gladys! Arthur wants you on the 'phone."

Gladys hastened downstairs. Mr. West had just come in at the front door from an inspection of the invalid car. "You needn't run," he told her. "The taxi isn't here yet; it isn't due for ten minutes."

"I'm wanted on the telephone," explained Gladys hastily.

Mr. West nodded in understanding, and passed upstairs to his wife's room.

"Is that you, Glad? I'm telephoning from the works—couldn't get the exchange from home," came her brother's worried tones. "Could you go round to Prince's Road Terrace this morning for a bit? You know Marjorie's cold? Well, it's influenza, and Bonnie's got it too. They're both in bed, and Bonnie's temperature is up a good deal, and there's baby to look after, and Emmeline—well, she does her best, you know, but she's an awful ass. Marjorie can't get better while she's worrying about baby

—and I don't see how I can stay at home to-day, there's trouble with the men."

"I'll come at once," began Gladys, and then in sudden distress: "Oh, Arthur!" she cried, "I'm going to London by this morning's train, to Edith's, you know."

"Oh, of course, I'd forgotten. Well, worse luck for me," said Arthur, taking up his burden of trouble again. "Hope you'll have a good time."

"Arthur—I'll tell Bertha to come round," suggested Gladys, much flurried and distressed.

"You needn't trouble," said Arthur grimly. "Don't worry, Glad; we shall pull through somehow. I hope mother's better this morning. Give my love to Edith. Good-bye."

The bell tingled in Gladys's ear. She stood still for a moment, her plain kindly face anxious and perplexed; then she went up to her mother's room, where she found Mr. West and Bertha moving restlessly about and carrying on a desultory conversation with the invalid.

"Mother," said Gladys firmly, removing her gloves, "Arthur's just rung up to say that Marjorie's cold has turned to influenza, and Bonnie has it too."

"And me in bed!" wailed Mrs. West, whose instinct was to rush to the scene of the trouble.

Mr. West ceased pacing the room and stood still in alarm.

"I don't like leaving them like that, especially with you ill too, mother," pursued Gladys. "I shan't go to London."

"Nonsense!" and "Impossible, love," came from Mr. and Mrs. West respectively.

"You can't cancel all your arrangements like that at the last minute," continued Mr. West irritably. "Arthur must look after his own household—he must get a nurse into the house."

"Besides, love," observed Mrs. West soothingly, "you can't leave Edith in the lurch like that."

"I can go round and do what I can for Marjorie," offered Bertha half-heartedly.

"Oh *no!*" said Gladys, remembering the tone of Arthur's "You needn't trouble." The other three looked at her in surprise, so she added hastily: "Bertha might catch the influenza, you know; she takes things so easily."

"I quite agree with you," said Mrs. West.

"Then Arthur must get a nurse," repeated her husband.

Gladys's good-natured face set itself in hard lines of obstinacy, and her eyes gleamed with determination behind her thick spectacles.

"A nurse can't nurse Bonnie and Marjorie and look after baby and get their special meals ready and keep an eye on Emmeline and the housework all at the same time," she objected firmly. "It's more than one person's work. I shan't go to London. I couldn't bear to go and leave them ill like that, especially as mother isn't able to get about and help them. Edith wouldn't wish me to go and leave Marjorie and Bonnie ill."

Considering the friendship between Edith and Marjorie, this was incontestably true.

A sudden idea came to Bertha; she flushed, and her eyes grew bright.

"If Gladys really doesn't want to go to London, and if mother thinks I really ought not to go to Arthur's, and yet it really seems a pity to disappoint Edith," she began, cloaking her eagerness in incoherence, "suppose I were to go to Edith instead of Gladys?"

"You, love?" said Mrs. West, amazed. "It wouldn't be much fun for you at Edith's with that delicate baby. Besides, you don't get on very well with Edith, you know you don't."

"Oh, mother!" exclaimed Bertha in well-simulated reproach. "How can you say such things? But just as you like, of course; I was only trying to find the best way out for everybody."

At this point the maid entered and said that the taxi had come and that Miss Daisy Hollins had called to see Miss Bertha. Daisy had developed a habit of calling for Bertha and accompanying her to town, and she admired the rich

Miss West so whole-heartedly that Bertha did not dislike this habit as much as she might have been expected to do considering Daisy's clothes and manners. She went downstairs to interview her. The housemaid, on Gladys's firmly-delivered command, dismissed the taxi.

While Bertha was out of the room Mrs. West said dubiously: "What do you think of Bertha's notion to go to Edith?"

"I think a change would do her good," answered Gladys promptly. "She hasn't looked at all well lately; she seems so tired and indifferent somehow."

"I hope she isn't going to have influenza," murmured Mrs. West anxiously.

"You'd think she wouldn't want to go to London when young Hollins is tied to the Institute for another fortnight or so," observed Mr. West, dissatisfied.

"But she will be back in time for the beginning of his holidays," urged Gladys. "The change will do her good. Engagements are always rather trying."

"Are they?" said Mrs. West dubiously. "Perhaps they are," she added, remembering certain ancient passages between her brother Dick and William West. "What a pity, Gladys, to have to unpack all your clothes and pack Bertha's!"

Gladys perceived that Bertha's departure to London was decided.

"I'll go straight up to Arthur's," she said. "Don't expect me back until you see me. I'll ring him up and let him know I'm going, so that he won't feel so anxious. If Bertha is quick with her packing she'll catch the half-past one train; it isn't half-past ten yet. I'll send a telegram to Edith on my way to Prince's Road Terrace."

She went downstairs and found Bertha in the drawing-room entertaining Daisy Hollins.

"Well?" asked Bertha eagerly.

"We all agree that it will be best for you to go," announced Gladys in a decided tone.

Bertha coloured with pleasure; the prospect of getting

away from Eustace for a little while was one of unalloyed bliss. She turned to Daisy and began volubly to explain matters to her.

"I'd better give you my London address," she concluded affably—she was so happy at the thought of a fortnight's immunity from the Hollins family that she had affability to spare. "Wait a minute! I'll just write a little note to Eustace explaining how it is I'm going away so suddenly; and I'll give him my address. Of course, he'll write to me often, I hope. You'll give him the little note as soon as ever he gets in at dinnertime, won't you? Thank you so much. I shall be back in time for his holidays."

The flattered Daisy agreed that all was for the best.

4.

Bertha's stay with her cousin was not particularly satisfactory. To begin with, Edith was too much like her father to be anything but bluntly sincere, and her straightforward downright manner of speech, plain vigorous face, and hearty laugh annoyed Bertha and made her feel weak and ineffective. Then, too, Edith was a learned person, possessing many academic degrees, and her amusements were not Bertha's. Her delicate little boy occupied a great part of her time, and Bertha seemed to spend endless hours walking beside a pram along dusty suburban roads. This was not Bertha's idea of a visit to London, and towards the end of her stay she went up to town by herself once or twice and did some shopping. But Bertha hated to be by herself; she required an escort, preferably a male one, to buy tickets, secure taxis, and inquire the route from policemen. Besides, what was the use of buying new spring clothes when there was nobody nowadays to take any interest in them? Eustace very rarely noticed Bertha's clothes, and if his attention was drawn to them and his admiration invited he frowned and fidgeted and finally made an absurd remark about some quite unim-

portant detail. The world seemed very flat and unprofitable to Bertha as she stood before long mirrors in expensive shops and tried on spring hats of enticing shape. Every time she adjusted her wavy black hair so that it should frame her face prettily beneath the hat she was trying, she remembered that Eustace hated to see her pull her curls down over her ears and fluff up her hair before a mirror; she had once rashly done this before a glass in the Hollinses' hall and his expression of unease and distaste puzzled and annoyed her still.

Her own distaste for Eustace grew daily, and it was increased rather than diminished by the letters which arrived from him regularly on alternate days. Eustace snatched a few minutes between classes, or sat up late at night, to write to Bertha the long, gay, whimsical letters which he conceived were suitable to the situation; and Bertha's face fell each time she perceived an envelope with a Hudley postmark lying on the silver salver respectfully proffered by Edith's trim maid.

"Another!" she would murmur mentally, conscious that she had not yet replied to the last one.

Each time she wrote to Eustace she apologized for not having written before, and her letters were simply accounts of what she had done in the past day or two, unenlivened by the slightest personal touch. They were indeed so bald that Eustace felt the customary affectionate pity with which he regarded Bertha nowadays deepen—the poor child's only medium of expression was so cold and unhappily stilted—and his pity made his letters longer, more affectionate, more whimsical than ever. Occasionally he would print a word in very large letters to indicate that it was to be read in an emphatic manner; he put question marks in brackets after sentences which to Bertha's eye were statements of incontestable facts; he used "suspensory dots" which Bertha did not understand—the novels she read did not deal in them—and his vigorous and graphic sentences sometimes relapsed into a series of phrases connected by dashes; while the variety

of his beginnings and endings enraged Bertha, to whom his fantasies seemed really idiotic.

One afternoon when the two cousins were sitting together while the boy rested upstairs, Edith reading, Bertha attempting to write to Eustace, the girl in despair showed her cousin one of his latest epistles, and permitted her to read it as a favour. Edith read on with interest, smiling and even occasionally chuckling, and at its conclusion handed it back to Bertha with the warm commendation :

"He must be a perfectly delightful person. But, of course, if he's a friend of Marjorie's that's a foregone conclusion. Why have I never seen him, I wonder? You're a lucky girl, Bertha, but I don't think you deserve him."

The infuriated Bertha gave her a sickly smile, and bent once more to her task of squeezing out short sentences. Presently, however, hopelessly stuck, she ventured timidly: "It's so difficult to know what to write to a man about."

Edith looked surprised and suggested with a smile, rocking her chair slowly backwards and forwards :

"Tell him about your new spring hat."

"Eustace is not interested in hats," said Bertha coldly.

"Pooh!" said Edith airily. "It all depends on the manner in which the subject is treated. I had four pages from Marjorie last autumn about her new winter hat, and they kept us amused for days."

"Marjorie," said Bertha with venom in her voice, "is clever."

Edith glanced at her sharply, and observed in a softer tone: "It doesn't matter in the least what you write about, my dear; he will be interested in anything you say. It's the personality of the letter that matters."

"Oh, Edith!" protested the hapless Bertha, squirming, "I wish you wouldn't say things like that. I'm so tired of hearing those clever funny things that don't mean anything."

Edith was silent, but the suspicion rose strong and lasting into her mind that Bertha did not really love the man she had promised to marry. Bertha divined the existence of this suspicion, and strove to allay it during the next few days by an excess of eagerness about Eustace's letters and by talking about him in an exaggerated manner. She saw that she was not successful, and her cousin's presence began to irk her; so that when on the morning of the day before that fixed for Bertha's departure Edith said politely :

"Will you stay over the week-end, Bertha? I shall be glad to keep you if you will."

Bertha replied with sudden decision :

"I'm afraid I couldn't. In fact, I was wondering, Edith, whether you would think me *too* rude if I went to-day. I could go by the two o'clock train, you know. You see"—with a pretty hesitation—"Eustace's holidays begin to-morrow."

Edith glanced at her, and observed with a shade of sarcasm :

"In that case I won't try to detain you."

Bertha went upstairs to pack. She was glad to be leaving Edith, whose frank candid nature somehow made her feel small and mean; but she did not relish the prospect of returning home to the dreary round of perplexing conversations with Eustace and plebeian meals with the Hollins family. She wished that she could be ill, or be killed in an accident, or that any unforeseen catastrophe would occur which would prevent her from returning to Hudley and Eustace. A sudden sense of her own loneliness and the dismal future swept over her, and tears came into her eyes and dripped upon the clothes she was folding.

"Edith thinks I don't love Eustace," she sobbed to herself. She packed the garment, and added in a whisper : "And I don't believe I do."

Horried at this appalling admission—for she had hitherto managed to pretend to herself that her dislike for Eustace was merely fanciful or at worst temporary—she

pulled herself together, dried her eyes, packed with speed and efficiency and presented a calm if slightly pale face to Edith at lunch, which was brought in early for her benefit.

At length it was time for her to go.

"Well," said Edith, kissing her, "you'll let me know when the wedding is to be, Bertha, won't you?"

The sarcasm in Edith's voice was too pronounced to be polite; Bertha glared angrily at her cousin.

"Very good of you to keep me company," continued Edith unabashed. "You've packed the parcel I gave you for Marjorie, haven't you? Give her my dearest love." Her voice shook a little; she hated to think that a hundred and fifty miles or so separated her from her friend and would probably continue to separate them all their lives. "I'm frightfully glad she and Bonnie have pulled through their influenza so successfully; Gladys is a dear good soul for nursing them with such devotion. Sorry I can't come to the station with you, but I promised Sonny to take him to that children's party, and he'd be bitterly disappointed if I didn't keep my word. Send me a line to let me know you've reached Hudley safely."

Bertha murmured suitable replies and stepped into the waiting taxi.

"Bertha!" called Edith loudly, "you've left your muff in the hall."

She put it through the open window of the taxi.

"I wish I hadn't brought it; people don't seem to use them so much now, and anyhow it's much too warm for muffs," said Bertha with a pettish air.

"Oh, well, you never can tell with April and May," observed Edith philosophically. "Sleet one day and deck-chairs in the garden the next. Best to be on the safe side. Don't forget to give my love to Marjorie."

She waved a careless hand and the taxi drove off.

As the vehicle wound its way down through long dreary roads of small shops and dusty houses Bertha tried to resign herself to the prospect before her. She said to herself: "It will be nice to see Eustace again," and honestly

made an effort to believe it. But she knew that in reality she never wanted to see Eustace again; her aversion for him had risen to unconquerable heights.

“I shall have to break the engagement!” she exclaimed suddenly. “I can never go through with it, never.”

This decision brought with it such a rush of relief that the ready tears stood again in her eyes. Almost immediately, however, the objections to such a course came streaming upon her—her father’s anger, her mother’s displeasure, the contempt of Gladys and Arthur, the fury of Mrs. Hollins, the grief and perplexity of Eustace, and worst of all, the possibility that she herself would have to remain unmarried all her life. This last objection convinced her of the futility of changing her whole plan of life for a mere whim—to these limits did she hastily contrive to reduce her distaste for Eustace—which probably owed its origin to the present unseasonably hot weather. By the time she arrived at St. Pancras she was again the dutiful wife-to-be of Eustace Hollins. The business of buying her ticket and having her trunk labelled still further steadied her nerves, and as she followed a porter on to the platform she was able to enjoy the bright sunshine and the distinction of her new spring hat. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in a carriage window, and put up her hand to arrange a wave of hair more prettily. The porter found her a seat in a first-class carriage, was tipped, and left her. Bertha disposed her hand-luggage on the rack, and leant out of the window to enjoy the spectacle of the crowded platform.

It was at this moment that she saw William Irwell and Violet Bollam threading their way slowly up the platform towards the carriage reserved for Hudley.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE TRAIN

1.

WILLIAM and Violet had had an early lunch together in town in accordance with their previous arrangement. William had intended to spend at least a portion of the afternoon with Violet, but she was so anxious to get rid of him that when he tentatively suggested departing by the earlier train, she clinched the matter by offering to accompany him to the station.

"I'll come with you and see you off, William," she had volunteered with her most condescending graciousness.

At the sight of her detested rival an elemental fury rose up in Bertha which blotted out all considerations of expediency and convention. She clenched her hand and began to breathe quickly, then drew in her head and sat down as the couple approached. Every detail of Violet's appearance was impressed indelibly upon her brain—her pale grey frock of fine cloth, her white furs, her Parisian hat with swooping brim and fluttering ospreys, her theatrical shoes and stockings, the bunch of violets at her breast—probably, thought Bertha, purchased by William—the exquisite delicacy of her pink and white complexion. Everyone turned to look at the couple, attracted by the extremely fashionable garb of Violet.

"William means to marry her because he can't have me," she thought, and a frantic jealousy filled her whole body.

Presently she ventured to peep out of her window once more; ten yards away Violet was bidding William a cold farewell.

"It's not much good my waiting here until the train

goes, is it, William?" she said. "And then the platforms always look so horrid when trains have gone—so empty, you know, and desolate, and such a crowd of people all streaming in the same direction."

"No good at all," agreed William, who was suffering badly and wished to terminate their painful interview. "Very good of you to bring me to the station. Of course," he said with an effort, lowering his voice, "if you should ever need anything, Violet, you can let me know."

"Oh yes, yes," answered Violet hastily, not taking in the sense of his words and impatient to be gone. "Good-bye, William."

"Good-bye," said William in a choked voice.

"She's going," thought Bertha, who was too far away to hear their conversation, but could gather its import by their actions. In a flash she collected her impedimenta, opened the carriage door, jumped on to the platform and advanced softly to where William, with his back to her, was watching Violet's progress through the crowd.

"Oh, William!" said Bertha in a tone of acute distress, "is that you? *Could* you find me a seat somewhere? The train seems so full, and my porter has got lost or something."

The startled William turned a white face to her; it was a terrible strain on his emotions to turn from Violet to Bertha in so short a space of time. However, he recovered himself almost immediately, took her suitcase, and said:

"Certainly. Very hot to-day, isn't it? There's a seat over here." He pushed his way towards the carriage which Bertha had just left, settled her in a corner seat, hesitated, then added: "I'll fetch my bag in here, if I may. Long journey—very tedious by yourself."

Bertha smiled charmingly at him. "Oh, I'm so glad I met you," she said. "I don't know what I should have done if I hadn't! I'm so stupid at travelling about by myself."

William gave her a protective smile, fetched his bag and deposited himself in the seat facing hers, which Bertha

had meanwhile defended strenuously from all comers. He brought with him a supply of magazines and newspapers of a feminine kind which he had secured for Bertha.

"Hollins will make her travel third and buy her a penny picture paper," he thought bitterly. Aloud he said: "Would you have preferred a seat in the luncheon-car? I believe they serve a late lunch on these trains. I didn't think of it before, because I happen to have lunched myself, but I can easily move your things if you like."

Bertha said instantly: "Thanks, I've lunched." Had William been about to partake of that meal Bertha was prepared to eat it likewise, though her appetite was normally small and fastidious, and Edith's lunch had been substantial.

The train drew out of the station. William adjusted the height of the window to meet Bertha's requirements, and leaning back rather wearily in his corner, surveyed her. She made a pretty enough picture, her hands resting on her lap within her large soft muff, her breast rising and falling quickly, disturbed by some unwonted emotion; her pale face with its fawn freckles framed in the soft bright curve of her new spring hat. William noted the hat with the eye of a connoisseur and approved it.

"I see you've been doing some shopping," he observed to her in jocular paternal style, with a glance towards the hat.

Bertha blushed prettily.

"Do you like it?" she asked with a provocative upward glance from her dark eyes.

"Oh rather!" replied William heartily.

Here he felt that he was embarking on dangerous waters; what right had he to approve of Bertha West's hats? His face darkened, and he took up a newspaper. Bertha, however, remained motionless, gazing out upon the flying country, her lips slightly parted, her eyes anxious and eager. From time to time sighs shook her body. The Hollins and West families were out of her thoughts altogether; at that moment nothing existed for

her except William, the blue-cushioned railway carriage with its black leather arms, and herself.

The only other occupants of the compartment, a man and his wife, were at this point summoned to lunch by an attendant with a red collar. As they went out the man closed the door leading into the corridor behind him. William and Bertha were alone.

The train flashed into a tunnel. Bertha's glance, startled by this abrupt change from sunlit fields to bricks and blackness, dropped; her eyes rested upon her muff.

It was at this moment that an abominable idea entered Bertha's head. She recoiled in horror from the thought of perpetrating such an indefensible action; her heart beat faster, her hands shook, she felt weak and terrified; nevertheless, moving her hands cautiously within her muff so that no upheaval appeared on its smooth furry surface, she took off her gloves, and turning her left hand gently upwards removed Eustace Hollins's ring from the third finger.

The train emerged from the tunnel with a roar. Bertha put her head back against the white lace antimacassar with a soft moan which was only half affected.

William dropped his newspaper in alarm, and exclaimed:

"Why, Bertha! What's the matter? It's the hot weather, I suppose, most unseasonable. Would you like a cup of tea?" Bertha shook her head. "I wonder if the heat is turned on?" He rose and inspected the handle which controlled the steam. "No, it's quite at the 'off' mark." He resumed his seat opposite her and said gently: "What is it, Bertha love? Are you really feeling ill? What a good thing you happened to meet me."

Bertha sat up, turned her pale face away from William's glance, and announced: "There's nothing really the matter with me, William, only I'm feeling rather upset to-day."

"Why?" asked William bluntly.

Bertha slowly withdrew her left hand from her muff and

displayed it to him. William bent forward, perceived her empty third finger and understood its significance. A dark flush overspread his face.

"You mean your engagement's broken?" he said.

Bertha nodded.

"When?"

"This morning," lied Bertha in a whisper. "I wrote to him—the letter would get there this morning."

There was a long pause.

At last William straightened himself, and his face took on a more natural hue.

"What have you broken it off for, Bertha?" he asked in a tone of affectionate reproof. "It's a serious thing to do, you know. Very serious."

Bertha was silent, her eyes downcast.

William waited a little while for a reply, then realizing that she did not mean to give him one, looked out of the window as if considering what to say next. Presently he turned to her again.

"I don't mind telling you, Bertha," he said, "that your engagement to Hollins was a great disappointment to me."

Bertha moved abruptly, raised tear-filled eyes, and began :

"Oh, William!"

This exclamation told William all he wanted to know.

"Whatever did you do it for, Bertha?" he demanded in a relieved tone. "He isn't a bit the kind of fellow for you, I could see that at once, the first time I set eyes on him. I thought you knew—surely you must have seen I wanted you. It was really an awful blow to me—the slump in trade was nothing to it," he added with a jocular lift of his eyebrows. He hesitated, then ventured : "I don't believe you ever really cared for him, Bertha."

"I didn't," wept Bertha, who was now sobbing with relief and joy. The image of Violet faded abruptly from her mind and lost all significance. "Oh, William, I have been so miserable."

"But what did you do it for?" persisted William. "Sheer contrariness?" He laughed, one of his theories being the utter illogicality of the female sex.

"It was this way," explained Bertha, collecting her scattered wits. "You see—he begged me so, William; you've no *idea* how he implored me, it was really terrible. He has such different ways of saying things from us."

"I've no doubt he can talk; these dreamy theoretical chaps always can," interjected William grimly.

"I thought perhaps it would be cruel to refuse him," continued Bertha, trembling with emotion.

"And how about me?" demanded the incensed William. "Didn't you think perhaps it might be cruel to refuse *me*?"

"I thought you were engaged," wailed Bertha, coming to some truth at last. "It was your brother—don't you remember, it was just at that time?—and I thought it was you. I thought you evidently didn't care about me at all, and Eustace *implored* me——" her voice broke on this appalling lie. "And that's how it happened."

"Nay!" said William in affectionate Hudleian tones. "Nay, Bertha! Why on earth should you think I was engaged to somebody else when I never looked at any one but you? You *have* made a mess of things."

"I know," admitted Bertha brokenly.

"Well, it's never too late to mend," said William cheerfully. His content was enormous; in imagination he was already married to Bertha and installed in a house of his own. "So you've broken it off with Hollins, eh?"

"Yes, this morning," said Bertha. "But oh, William! Whatever will father and mother say? They'll be *furios*. And Arthur too—he and Eustace are such friends."

"What's Arthur got to do with it?" demanded William, who did not like Arthur. "Do you mean that Mr. and Mrs. West don't know about your breaking off your engagement?"

"They don't know yet," said Bertha nervously. "I simply daren't tell them."

"I see—you just wrote to Hollins and sent him his ring back yesterday," said William, nodding his comprehen-

sion. "H'm. Well, I'm sorry for him, but I don't think you'd have been happy together."

"I'm sure we shouldn't," agreed Bertha, clutching Eustace's ring tightly within her muff.

"Well, what are we to do like?" inquired William, relapsing into the vernacular in order to conceal the intensity of his relief. "If you just break off your engagement and say nothing about me, we shall have to wait a year at least before we can come together. It's an awful waste of time."

"What do you think I ought to do, William?" asked Bertha humbly, hanging on his every word.

"I think perhaps it would be as well to tell your father that we had a misunderstanding at Christmas, and it was that which led to your taking Hollins," suggested William. "Of course we shall have to wait a good time before we do anything publicly, but it would be more comfortable if your parents understood what was going on. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," agreed Bertha. "But oh, William!" she added, the tears again coming into her eyes, "I simply daren't tell them. I simply daren't. At the time I was so determined to have Eustace, you know—you see, I thought you were engaged. They don't even know I'm coming home to-day," she concluded thoughtfully.

"You're a silly girl, Bertha West," William told her affectionately. "A silly girl. A nice mess you've got yourself into. I wonder you had the courage to write to Hollins and break it off."

Bertha winced.

"Tell you what I'll do," continued William. "The train stops for a good few minutes at Denbridge to pick up the Manchester connection. I'll telegraph for the car to meet me at Denbridge, and drive straight up to Beech Lea and see your father. You'll go on to Hudley in the train, you see, and by the time you arrive at Beech Lea all the first fuss will be over. You can waste a few minutes at Hudley Station to give me a little more time. How will that do?"

"Splendidly," said Bertha from a thankful heart. Privately she thought: "I'll call at the Hollins's on my way up from Hudley Station, and ask Eustace if he got my letter. I'll stick to it that I wrote one, and that it must have gone astray." For a second she considered the possibility of confessing to William that her engagement was not yet broken. "But it will make such a bother," she thought. "Besides, I should have to tell father and mother myself in that case. This way is much better, and it's fairly safe; I think it will be all right, and I shan't be found out. Oh, God, please let me not be found out just this once; I'll always be good afterwards if you'll let me off just this once." Aloud she said: "It was the idea of having to tell father and mother that upset me so just now. I'm so glad I shan't have that to do; it is good of you, William."

William privately rejoiced that he was a practical man, accustomed to handling situations and managing his fellow-men, the possessor of half a million of money, and not at all afraid of anything which Mr. West might say to him on any subject. He was, in fact, sincerely proud of his ability to shield Bertha from the necessity of being courageous.

The train ran on; Bertha dried her eyes; William at great cost secured for her a cup of tea within proscribed hours; the lunchers returned to the carriage; the train drew into a large station, and William despatched a telegram to his chauffeur.

"So that's settled," he said as he re-entered the carriage.

Bertha shivered a little now that her breach with Eustace was made inevitable. She did not feel equal to facing the censure which must befall her. Oh, that it were a week, a month, a year hence! Oh, that she could be comfortably married to William without going through the scenes which awaited her. There was one, for example, which she would have to go through with Eustace. . . .

"Well, I shall get through it somehow," she told herself. "He can't kill me."

Nevertheless, she felt curiously sick at heart at the

thought of what must be her opening sentence : " Did you get my letter this morning ? "

At Sheffield, where they changed trains, the change had to be performed in considerable haste. When Bertha, trembling with excitement—for they were now in Yorkshire and Denbridge and Hudley were not far distant—found herself after some tense seconds seated in the local train, she felt that something was missing. She was puzzled for a minute or two, then realized with a flash of horror what was lacking—Eustace's ring. She rummaged frantically inside her muff, and even shook it upside down when William was not looking ; she searched her gloves, her pockets, her bag. The ring was not to be found. It must have slipped from her agitated fingers as she hurried up the platform.

" Lost something ? " inquired William genially.

" Only my purse—I've found it now," lied Bertha with a wan smile.

But it was hideous to have lost the ring ! And Eustace so poor, too ! Oh, it was abominable, it was horrible ; somehow or other it would prove her ruin ! Why had she not leaped from the carriage while there was yet time and searched for it ? " Yes," answered her other self sardonically, " with William to help you. Don't be so silly ; of course you couldn't do anything."

" I shall never forgive myself for having lost that ring," thought Bertha, and her face took on a terrified and miserable expression which William tried in vain to soothe away.

At length the train puffed slowly into Denbridge. At the sight of the small rural station, with its painted wooden palings and gravelled platform, Bertha's last remaining shred of courage left her. Her pallor became so marked that William was alarmed.

" There's nothing to be frightened about, love," he assured her tenderly. " Just a day or two's unpleasantness and then everything will be all right. I'll go at once, and I won't leave Beech Lea till your father and mother are quite soothed and calm."

He opened the carriage door and descended.

“William!” gasped Bertha suddenly, leaning out of the window, “I shall wait a *long* time at Hudley Station, so as to give you a good half-hour.”

“Very well,” agreed William cheerfully.

He left the station and climbed into his brother’s two-seater, which was standing in the road waiting for him. Bertha heard the chauffeur start the engine, and presently saw the car in the distance, flying up Denbridge Hill. She closed her eyes and put her head back, overcome by the force of her own emotions.

2.

Lizzie Hollins gazed out upon Denbridge platform in a frenzy of doubt and fear. She had been to Denbridge to spend the afternoon with friends and was returning home to tea. Being of a nervous disposition, she preferred travelling home by train to taking the tram, for the terrific gradient of Denbridge Hill frightened her, and every second of the tram’s slow groaning progress up it was to her one of anguish. There had indeed been innumerable accidents on the hill, and even Mrs. Hollins did not jeer at Lizzie for preferring the train, though it was a long uphill walk from Hudley Station to Derwent Terrace.

Always afraid of being left behind or of some other incalculable disaster occurring, Lizzie had climbed into a third-class compartment as soon as the train entered the station, though she knew it would not start for some time to come. She had not seated herself when to her extreme surprise she heard Bertha West’s voice say “*William!*” in a tone of anguish. Lizzie, her heart beating fast, looked out of the window along the train. It was indeed Bertha whom she had heard speak, and who now continued: “*I shall wait a long time at Hudley Station, so as to give you a good half-hour,*” for Lizzie could see Bertha’s side-face, pale and anxious, as the girl leaned out of an adjoining first-class carriage.

Lizzie also perceived William Irwell.

Her heart filled with rage and grief. The expression on

Bertha's face, the tone of her voice, were not such as Eustace's fiancée should have permitted herself in conversation with any other man.

"What does it mean?" thought Lizzie nervously. "Why should she wait at the station? Why should he have a good half-hour? Are they afraid of being seen together?" All kinds of lurid notions jumbled about in her mind, amid which one emerged as certain: "It's what I said—she loves William Irwell, she doesn't care two-pence for Eustace. She means to throw him over."

At this last thought an unholy glee seized Lizzie, for she hated Bertha with all her heart. "He'll be better without her!" she argued fiercely. "Thank God he's out of her clutches!" But at this moment the picture of Eustace's grief-stricken face struck her like a blow. "It will break his heart to lose the girl he loves," moaned Lizzie. "After all, if he wants her he shall have her. What does it matter whether I hate her or not? You should try to give people what they want and not what you think they ought to want. If he wants her he shall have her."

She composed herself, and tried to think how this—this whatever it was—this affair with William Irwell could best be stopped. Bertha was not expected home until to-morrow. Eustace would, therefore, not be at the station to meet her. It was the last day of term at the Institute, and Eustace would probably be there still—the station clock said five fifty-five—tidying up papers and saying farewells. William Irwell had left Bertha, and Bertha was going to wait "a long time" at Hudley Station. If Eustace met Bertha, unexpectedly, while William was absent? Would that help? Would it give him a chance of reclaiming her? At any rate, it would bring him to the spot at once before any further damage was done to his interests in Bertha's heart.

"I could telephone to the Institute," thought Lizzie, hot and excited.

She slipped cautiously from the train into the entrance-hall of Denbridge Station, where there was a public call-box.

Telephones were a source of dread to Lizzie; she did not understand them and was not accustomed to their use. Moreover, in crises she always lost her head and got in a panic. But her love for Eustace strengthened her. "*I will telephone*," she told herself. "*I will. I must. It's quite easy; other people do it.*" She drew off her gloves and with hot nervous fingers fluttered the pages of the telephone-book. Would it be under "*Municipal*" or "*Institute*"? A sharp ting-a-ling outside on the platform announced that the Manchester train was signalled. Ah! "*Hudley 1270.*" Tremblingly she turned the old-fashioned handle, and clutching the receiver with all her strength held it to her ear.

She had to repeat the number three times before the girl understood it aright—the "*0*" at the end was a fruitful source of perplexity—then there was a long silence, then a "*Hullo!*" then a brisk command to put the pennies in. She fumbled agonisedly at her purse with one hand, afraid to put down the receiver; the loud humming noise which roared in her ears as she inserted the necessary coins terrified her. Was there something wrong with the instrument? Another long pause.

By this time Lizzie was covered with perspiration, and was trembling so violently that she could hardly stand. She discovered the small stool and sank on to it gratefully. Through the glass door of the box she could see other people walking about in a callous and unconcerned manner. "*What a fool I must look!*" she thought angrily, sniffing and wrinkling up her nose. The fact that her struggles with the telephone were farcical, and that she knew it, only increased the tragic intensity of the situation.

"*Hullo!*" said a sudden loud voice in her ear.

"*Is that the Municipal Institute?*" gasped Lizzie.

"*Yes. Who's that, please?*" continued the voice, bored.

The Manchester express rounded the curve with a roar and steamed into the station.

"*I want to speak to Mr. Hollins—I'm Miss Hollins,*" said Lizzie, almost choked by emotion. "*It's terribly urgent.*"

“Hold on, I’ll fetch him,” said the voice reassuringly. “He’s still in the building, I think.”

Lizzie, her heart beating, the blood throbbing in her ears, her left hand cramped with the intensity of her grasp of the receiver, watched the swift exodus of travellers across the bridge into the Hudley train. The express roared unconcernedly out. Luggage was transhipped. Porters shut the doors, the guard waved a green flag, the station-master whistled. “In any case I shall miss the train,” thought Lizzie. “Mother will be furious. But that doesn’t matter if I can only get on to Eustace in time.”

A cloud of steam ascended from the funnel of the engine, and the train moved slowly up the slope towards Hudley.

3.

At the moment when the Manchester express drew into Denbridge Station, Eustace was sitting at his desk in the Municipal Institute. His feelings were melancholy. The grind of term was over, examination papers were corrected, reports were written, registers completed; his papers were tidied and most of his farewells said. In his hand he held a letter from the brother of his former Manchester school-master, to whom he had written at Christmas. In this letter he was offered a journalistic job—not so well paid even as the badly-paid Edinburgh one, but on a better paper, which was actually domiciled in Fleet Street. In spite of the fact that Eustace had seen Fleet Street and knew just what it looked like, it was to him the most desirable place in the whole world. As he twirled the letter regretfully between his fingers golden visions of Fleet Street floated in his mind. The letter advised him to go up and see his prospective employer as soon as possible. The writer had seen some of Eustace’s work and wrote encouragingly. Were it not for Bertha, Eustace would start to-morrow morning by the earliest possible express to London, full of joy and hope, prepared for failure but zealous for success.

As it was, he sighed, addressed an envelope, and drawing towards him a sheet of Institute notepaper, began to compose the heartrending letter of refusal which he must send—no use in delaying or in discussing the matter with his family; the letter should be written now and posted on his way home. Best to get the wrench over at once. Next week he was to begin work for the estimable but depressing Robert at a salary precisely three times that offered him in Fleet Street. Ah well! He began to write: "*After you have taken so much trouble I am almost ashamed—*"

At this point his pen slipped violently across the paper, for the Institute's secretary ran into the room exclaiming:

"Mr. Hollins! Your sister on the 'phone. Very urgent. Terribly urgent."

Eustace crammed the notepaper into his pocket and ran along the wide echoing corridors, his face hot and his heart anguished.

"There's been an accident or something," he thought. "Mother—Daisy——"

He snatched the receiver and called in alarm:

"Hullo! Who's that? Is it Lizzie?"

"Yes, it's me," shrilled Lizzie into the telephone. "Listen, Eustace. Go down to the station at once and meet Bertha."

"Is there anything wrong?" inquired Eustace, a trifle relieved.

"Well——"

"An accident?" demanded Eustace in a panic.

"No, no!" Lizzie reassured him. "I'm at Denbridge; Bertha has come home to-day instead of to-morrow, she's on the six-five train. Go and meet her."

"I don't think I can do it," said Eustace dubiously, glancing at his watch.

"You *must*!" shrieked Lizzie. "Even if you have to take a taxi. Go *now*, go *at once*, Eustace! To please me, *go*."

"Very well," agreed Eustace crossly. "But what a fuss about nothing! I thought somebody was ill or hurt or something—you gave me an awful fright."

He slammed down the receiver, wound the handle furiously, took his hat from the secretary, who had thoughtfully brought it along with him, sprinted rapidly from the building, caught a tram, and arrived at the station at seven minutes past six.

Bertha was already outside, mounting a taxi, with the intention of driving round to Derwent Terrace, interviewing Eustace, and proceeding to Beech Lea, all before the departure of William from her home. Her face was haggard, with dark shadows under the eyes, and when she saw Eustace she turned pale, and caught at the taxi door for support.

"Eustace!" she said.

"You didn't expect to see me, did you?" said Eustace jauntily, on the whole rather pleased with himself. His swift passage from the Institute to the station seemed to him a rather clever and Hudleian thing to do—not at all the kind of action usually performed by the dreamy Eustace Hollins. He tipped with a lavish air the porter who approached wheeling Bertha's luggage, helped Bertha into the taxi, commanded the driver "Beech Lea," and sank into his seat well satisfied with himself. He observed the new spring hat, and rejoiced that the necessity for farewells at the Institute had caused him to don his best blue suit that morning. It was rather exciting to meet one's fiancée at the station on her return from London—quite the sort of thing that other people, ordinary sensible people, did. Eustace was always glad to find himself doing something that other people did—it made him feel more at home in the world.

"You look awfully tired, Bertha," he said sympathetically. "Didn't London air agree with you?"

His harmonious tones smote with an alarming ring upon Bertha's ear, attuned to the comfortingly Hudleian accents of William.

"Didn't you get my letter?" she whispered, reflecting that after all perhaps Eustace's presence at the station was an advantage; she could break the news to him now without fear of encountering Mrs. Hollins. Yet if anyone saw

them driving up together, and on the morrow heard that the engagement was broken, how strange it would seem! "Did you get my letter?" she repeated insistently.

"No, dear, I didn't," said Eustace. "Was it to let me know that you had decided to come home a day earlier?"

"Oh, Eustace!" said Bertha with simulated grief, as the taxi shot along Hudley's main street, "I'm so sorry you didn't get my letter—it makes it so difficult for us both."

"How?" inquired Eustace. He moved, and the newspaper on which he had begun to write his refusal of the Fleet Street job crackled. He sighed.

"I wrote you a letter," said Bertha, finding the deception easier than she had feared, "and I enclosed something for you."

"What?" asked Eustace, beginning to think her manner strange, and wondering a little about Lizzie's message.

"A ring," said Bertha in a strained voice, averting her eyes.

"A ring!" repeated Eustace stupidly, not understanding in the least what she meant. "A ring! I don't understand, Bee." In the innocence of his heart he felt pleased with himself for having so skilfully worked in Bertha's pet name. "She's a dear little thing," he thought almost sincerely. "I believe I really am in love with her."

"It was *your* ring!" cried Bertha, exasperated. "I sent it back to you. I sent a letter to explain. We aren't engaged any more." She looked at him angrily.

Eustace stared at her in uncomprehending amazement. The blood slowly receded from his face as he realized her meaning. His first thought was: "Another failure! I can't even keep a silly little thing like her. Oh, Lord, what a hopeless failure I am!" He stammered stupidly: "But why, Bertha? Why? What have I done? Have I annoyed you or something?" He thought of the many sacrifices of hopes and of sincerity which he had made for her. He surveyed her prettiness, suddenly so far away and unattainable. He thought, with a pang, of the letters he had written to her during the last fortnight, in which

he had revealed the true and genuine Eustace, full of sympathy and yearning for affection. She had been amused, perhaps, by his whims and fantasies? The picture of her reading his outpourings with a critical eye was intolerable; it could not be. "Oh, Bertha," he said, genuinely moved, "you don't mean what you say. You can't mean it. Why should you want to—to——"

"I find I've made a mistake, that's all," said Bertha coldly. She turned away her face, sick with longing for him to leave her.

"But I haven't had any letter," protested Eustace in a vague uncertain manner, not really knowing what he was saying. "I haven't had a letter, Bertha. Nor a ring."

"It must be lost, then," said Bertha. She shot a keen glance at Eustace to see how he would take this.

Eustace observed the glance. The unbridled fury of the mild person unduly provoked suddenly seized upon him. He saw red. All the hot resentment against fate which had been silently accumulating in his heart since that January afternoon in the park burst out in a flaming torrent. He turned savagely upon Bertha and shouted: "I don't believe a word you say. I don't believe a single word you say."

"Eustace!" screamed Bertha in despair at this unexpected turn of events. "How can you? What do you mean?"

"What do *you* mean?" retorted Eustace furiously, only half-conscious of his words. "Why did Lizzie telephone from Denbridge? Tell me that."

"Lizzie? From Denbridge?" gasped Bertha. "Oh, Eustace, I——" She perceived that the taxi was rolling up Prince's Road; in a moment or two it would reach the Lane. It was impossible for her to arrive at Beech Lea in a taxi with Eustace. She tried to control her panic, and said firmly: "Eustace, do listen to what I say. I find I've made a mistake; I can't go on with our engagement. I wrote to you to tell you so, and enclosed your ring. The letter is evidently lost. I'm very sorry, but it can't be

helped. Please don't come any further with me." ("That's sincere and dignified," she congratulated herself.) Just then William Irwell's chauffeur passed by, driving the two-seater down Prince's Road. William was not in it; he was evidently still at Beech Lea. The sight threw Bertha completely off her balance. "Will you go, Eustace?" she cried. "Please go. I want you to go."

"I won't go until I've had an explanation of this extraordinary conduct," shouted Eustace, still in a fine frenzy. "Why should I be made a fool of like this? Why should I give up Edinburgh for you and then you change your mind? I don't believe a word you say. Where's the letter? I haven't got it. Where's the ring? I don't believe you ever wrote me a letter. What made Lizzie telephone from Denbridge?"

The taxi hooted, paused, and turned up the Lane; Bertha collapsed into a torrent of tears. She crouched into the corner away from Eustace; sobs shook her body and burst spasmodically from her lips.

"You're going to ruin my whole life," she wailed.

Eustace's anger left him as suddenly as it had come, and he saw himself as the complete cad, shouting at an unfortunate girl who—quite naturally—didn't want to marry him, and making her cry. He coloured with shame. "I didn't think you were such an atrocious bounder," he murmured to himself. "There's something rather queer though. . . ." He swallowed hard, and said quietly: "I'm awfully sorry I frightened you, Bertha. You want to break off our engagement; that's all right, of course. I accept your decision. Please don't worry about it any more." Something seemed to give way in his throat, and he understood once and for all how Daisy felt during an attack of hysteria. "I'll go," he stammered in a shaking voice, and laid a hand on the window.

Bertha lifted her dark tear-filled eyes to him. (To Eustace she had never looked so beautiful.) She searched his face, and the strange conviction seized her that she could trust him with secrets which she dared tell neither to William Irwell nor to her family.

"It's all my fault, Eustace," she told him, sincere at last. "I never really loved you." (Eustace winced.) "It's William Irwell really whom I——"

"Lizzie was right then," murmured Eustace.

"You see," continued Bertha in a broken voice. She paused, hesitated, and lied. "We quarrelled, you see, and that was why, that afternoon in the park——"

"Yes, yes," said Eustace hastily, finding her humiliation intolerable.

"To-day I met William in London by chance—quite by chance, Eustace," pursued Bertha on a pleading note, "and travelled home with him. And I told him I'd broken off my engagement with you, and I took off your ring, and I lost it." She looked at him with terrified eyes. "I lost it at Sheffield."

"It doesn't matter in the least," said Eustace with complete sincerity. "Not in the least. But if I were you," he coloured and looked away, "I think I would keep to the letter story. . . . After all, it's nobody's business but yours how the engagement was broken."

Bertha looked at him in amazement; and for the first time in their acquaintance she perceived that there was something really fine about Eustace and that she had wronged him.

"I'm sorry," she began feebly. "I'm very sorry."

The taxi stopped; it had entered the gates of Beech Lea without their being aware of it, and was now standing in front of the porch. Eustace became aware of a row of horrified white faces on the doorstep. A hot resentment surged up in him once more; he hurled open the door of the vehicle, removed his hat, and addressing Bertha, said in a high uneven voice:

"The letter has probably been stolen for the sake of the ring . . . better if you had . . . a registered envelope . . . If I had known . . . of course . . . shouldn't have troubled you with my presence . . ."

Suddenly unable to continue, he put on his hat and strode hotly down the drive.

"I defy the whole history of the world to produce a

more humiliating situation," he told himself passionately as he passed out through the tall iron gates.

William Irwell, his usually shrewd face softened by emotion, descended the Beech Lea steps and half-carried the limp and weeping Bertha into the hall. Mr. West looked on, grim and frowning.

"Call Miss Gladys," he commanded, turning to a frightened maid who stood by.

Mrs. West ran out from the study; she had been much upset by the revelations which William had just finished making, and her gentle face showed signs of recent tears.

"Has there been an accident?" she cried, alarmed by Bertha's pallor.

"Hollins never got the letter; must have met her on the way up and got into the taxi with her; beastly job for both of them," explained William, who had overheard—as he was meant to do—Eustace's incoherences.

"My poor child!" said Mrs. West. "Come upstairs, love."

She assisted Bertha to rise.

Gladys now appeared. Her face was flushed and angry, and her eyes had a scornful gleam behind her spectacles.

"Shall I send for the doctor?" she inquired in a hard tone.

Mr. West's stern expression relaxed, and he felt Bertha's pulse in alarm.

"No, no; I'm quite all right, father," protested Bertha, her eyes filling with tears of self-pity.

"Don't worry about anything," commanded Mr. West anxiously. "Just go to bed and have a good sleep. Everything will be all right in the morning."

Gladys silently offered her arm. Bertha took it, and trailed upstairs to bed, exaggerating the unsteadiness of her gait so as to secure the sympathy and pity of her evidently hostile sister.

A murmur of commiseration followed her.

CHAPTER XV

ESCAPE OF EUSTACE

1

EUSTACE in a fury walked straight down the Lane, crossed Prince's Road, made his way at top speed through a network of mean streets and emerged at one end of that promenade where Bertha had once upbraided him for making a scene in the open air. He plunged headlong down the woods into the valley, selecting the most direct and abrupt paths and maintaining a fierce but steady pace. Arrived in the valley, he crossed a small white bridge and applied himself with the same uncompromising vigour to the steep stony path which ascended the opposing hill. His instinct was to fly from the haunts of men and cast himself upon the broad and sympathizing hills, and his present route was the shortest possible one from Hudley to tramless country. Profound humiliation, wounded pride, relief, disgust, perplexity, and unreasoning rage fought for the possession of his soul; he breathed fast, his face had a deep flush, and an immense feverish energy drove him impatiently onwards.

Reaching the summit of the hill, he pressed fiercely on along a broad white road. On one side of the road green fields rolled pleasantly down into a broad valley; on the other side dark moors rose upwards into a culminating mass of rocks which stood out grim and black against the pale gold of the evening sky. Eustace was in no mood for smooth roads and green fields; he swerved abruptly to the left into the coarse grass plentifully besprinkled with round black stones, which presently gave place to the dry crackling stems and dark leaves of as yet unflowering

heather ; and stumbled in fierce haste across the moor in a direct line towards the rocks.

When at length he arrived there, hot and panting, his furious burst of energy had somewhat relieved the conflicting passions of his heart ; he climbed upon the topmost rock, and flinging himself down upon its rough black surface, lay there motionless for a while. The cool evening breeze soothed him ; presently he sat up, moved himself into a more comfortable position with his back against an outstanding spur of rock, and considered the surrounding scenery with vacant glance, while his whirling thoughts began gradually to subside into their accustomed places.

From this high point there was a glorious panorama of rolling country ; in the distance, clinging to the lower slopes of several large and contemptuous hills, Hudley, its canopy of smoke slightly poetized by the golden gleam of the evening sun, made a grimy but somehow romantic and companionable smudge.

“ Things always appear romantic and picturesque from the outside,” observed Eustace gloomily, nevertheless somewhat touched by this view of his native town.

He had keen eyesight, and even from this distance he could perceive a Hudleian tram crawling audaciously up an appalling slope towards an outer suburb. Although it was not yet dark the tram was lighted, and Eustace’s glance followed the light moving up the hillside, losing it for a while between the streets of small houses, then finding it again as it emerged into a pleasant road winding upward between green fields. In the light of the now setting sun these green fields and the bright yellow oblongs of the lighted gas-lamps along the roadside took on a strange soft clearness, attractive, mysterious, suggestive of some whimsical modern illustration of fairyland. The tram, with a pathetic enduring courage, wound laboriously round a sharp turn in the road and passed out of sight. Eustace, his head on one side, smiled with amused pleasure at his own absurd fancies about the yellow gas-lamps and the heroic tram ; a slight shiver shook him, he returned to

a more normal state of mind and began to think of Bertha.

"I never really wished to marry Bertha, so I ought to be glad to have done with her," he thought, ashamed of his recent fury.

Nevertheless, there was a sting in his afternoon's experiences. It is not a pleasant experience for any man, after being engaged to a girl for four months or so and devoting his best efforts to pleasing her, to be informed that the young lady has never cared for him at all, and simply took him up out of pique. Moreover, since his quarrel with Bertha on the subject of the theatre, the sentiment of pity, if not its near relation, love, was always present in Eustace's feelings for the weak and silly Bertha, and her absence in London had heightened his affection. He had enjoyed writing those long self-revealing letters to her, he had enjoyed finding new whimsical endearments for her, and her cold embarrassed replies had touched him and added to the large treasures of love and pity which dwelt in his heart and yearned to be used. Then, only yesterday, having discovered from Gladys that Bertha's birthday was drawing near, he had repaired to town and depleted his scanty exchequer by the purchase of a long slender golden chain such as he had once heard Bertha casually admire. He had been excited about this present, had devoted much time and thought to its selection, and had paid manfully though with a momentary wince the extra half-guinea necessary to secure a suitably impressive blue velvet case to hold the chain. For Eustace it was an undoubted fact that his affection for people grew in proportion as he did kindly things for them. During his hasty voyage to the station he had thought pleasurably of the chain and its velvet case, and of how Bertha's pretty mouth would curve up into a delighted smile when she received it. Now the remembrance of it hurt, and made him grind his teeth and swear.

"The ring, too, is lost," thought Eustace, and a hard bitter feeling invaded his heart. He tried manfully to be

impartial. "It wasn't her fault that she lost it—oh, but how could she, how could she!" he exclaimed, striking his hands together. "What unmitigated vileness! Upon a mere tiff with her beloved Irwell she seizes on me, practically proposes to me . . ." Details of the scene in the park seared his brain and choked his speech. "How could she do anything so vile as to take hold of my life and turn it out of its course simply in order to annoy somebody whom she pretends to love? It's incredible!" To him such a motive was indeed incredibly base; Bertha's real reason for her action, had she but confessed it to him, would have secured his sympathy, but he could find none for this vulgar pique. "It's not even as though I had made love to her before," he ruminated, "for I never had. Or even, in order to be quite fair to her, admit that I *had* shown her some slight attention, that hardly justifies her in tricking me into becoming engaged to her." Here his conscience told him: "That was *your* fault; you put your arm round her and told her you cared for her. Naturally she put the customary interpretation on those words." "Very well," agreed Eustace fiercely, "I admit that I gave her cause to think I loved her. But even so—what a vile deception! Has she ever breathed a word to me about William Irwell until to-day? No! And then, at the very first opportunity she has, she tells him a lie, loses my engagement ring, tells me another lie, and only confesses the truth when I shout at her. Or was it when I stopped shouting at her? In either case—what infamy! And yet I dare say Bertha thinks herself a martyr."

He fell into silence for a while. As a child he had always marvelled at the capacity which historical personages displayed for enduring shame. He had never been able to understand how generals could endure to lose battles by negligence and continue to live, nor how ministers of state could remain alive after being impeached, nor why defeated kings did not immediately commit suicide after signing disgraceful capitulations. He had always been astounded to find these disgraced personages turning up again alive a few pages further on in the

history-book, perhaps getting married or giving banquets, and apparently quite cheerful. Growing a little older, Eustace had continued to wonder what it felt like to be a criminal—how terrible it must be to feel that one's own beloved self had done something really vile. He occasionally heard, too, of men who underwent social ostracism for some unpleasant baseness, and could not understand how they could continue to eat their dinner and go to bed under such an overwhelming load of shame.

Now, however, with the example of Bertha before him he felt suddenly that he understood the mentality of evil-doers; for he realized that no man is a criminal in his own eyes: he can always find extenuating circumstances for his own misdeeds. Generals who disgracefully lost battles said: "If only that idiotic Numidian squadron had come up when I expected it! How was I to know that it was twenty miles away, I ask you?" Murderers murmured to themselves: "If you only knew how he annoyed me! He sniffed so, it was positively unendurable. And then he never got on with my wife. Of course other people think I have committed a cold-blooded murder, but they don't realize the circumstances. They'll understand me better when I'm gone."

Eustace was amused at his own theory; he pursued it further, and imagined traitors to their country saying: "My dear fellow, I assure you that I had such a headache that afternoon when I interviewed the foreign envoys that I really didn't know what to do! Fact, I assure you. Hadn't slept a wink the night before." Finally he imagined Bertha's plaintive self-defence: "I was so *terribly* wretched, and Eustace loved me—at least I thought so. Afterwards I was horrified at what I had done, but I tried to make the best of it . . . but, after all, it's much better to hurt Eustace a little now than to marry him and hurt him afterwards."

"Specious and plausible, my dear," murmured Eustace grimly. "Nevertheless, your conduct has been abominable, and in anybody else you would condemn it as such. Ah! these two standards of judgment—one for ourselves

and one for everybody else. And yet," he continued thoughtfully, "I don't believe there is so very much difference between the standards of judgment—it's simply that we know the extenuating circumstances of our own crimes, and we don't know those of other people's."

The twilight was now fading, and Eustace began to feel cold. He rose and clambered down the rocks and made a bee-line for the road, stumbling over the black stones and tufts of heather. The glow of the sunset and of Eustace's theories had gone; he felt tired and miserable, and began wearily to consider his own situation.

He blenched at the prospect of the forthcoming interview with his mother. Mrs. Hollins would be scornful of her son's inability to keep the rich Bertha's love, and rave at his changed prospects.

"Of course, I shall be obliged to give up the idea of working for Robert West," thought Eustace.

A large doubt entered his mind—would his mother permit him to do so? Regarded from a strictly commercial point of view there was no reason why the broken engagement should nullify Robert's engagement with Eustace. In law Robert would be bound to employ Eustace by virtue of certain papers which had passed between them. Nevertheless, Eustace felt with his whole soul that such a course would be base and unworthy of him.

"I shall have to join the ranks of the unemployed," he sighed. He had reached the road, and now walked drearily on through the deepening dusk. "If only I hadn't refused that Edinburgh job!" At this moment he remembered his unfinished letter refusing the position in London. He took the sheet from his pocket, tore it into small pieces, and scattered them over the wall into an adjacent field. "What a mercy Lizzie telephoned me!" he thought. "If she hadn't done so I should have refused the job and posted the letter before I heard that Bertha had made up her mind to throw me over. What a mercy Lizzie telephoned me!"

He came to the brow of the hill and began to descend the steep stony lane in utter dejection of spirit.

"I *ought* to go to London to-morrow morning," he mused. "I ought not to accept anything from any West, Robert or another. I ought to send him a dignified note, write to London to make an appointment with this editor for the day after to-morrow, and leave Hudley by the first train to-morrow morning. That is the proper, dignified, and independent course of action. But what a fearful scene I should have with mother! If only she were not a widow, and if she didn't suffer so from gout, and if there weren't the girls to consider——"

Here he suddenly broke into a great shout of laughter. "Extenuating circumstances!" he roared aloud. Then he perched himself upon the low stone wall bordering the path, and put to himself the following case:

"Suppose you had within the circle of your acquaintance a young man who was about to marry a rich girl and be taken into business by her brother—a business which he happened to dislike. The girl, rather abominably, threw him over. At the same time he was offered another job in a business which he liked immensely. But he did not take it; he decided to do the work he disliked and remain under an obligation to the girl's brother, because he could not endure the thought of an unpleasant domestic scene. What would you think of him?"

It was only too clear that the supposititious young man was a far from admirable weakling.

"I'm quite as ready at inventing extenuating circumstances for my misdeeds as Bertha is," thought Eustace. "We all do it . . ."

He remained sitting on the wall, lost in meditation, while the twilight deepened into dark, and the stars came slowly out. He realized that his own habit of "giving in" to people was not really due to unselfishness, to innate refinement or to a desire to spare other people's feelings; it was simply due to the fact that he could not bear the sight of pain, and that to spare himself that unpleasant sight he would agree to anything which anybody demanded, not excepting things which he knew to be wrong.

He pictured himself concealing his own feelings of

distaste, giving way to his mother, doing work for Robert West and doing it badly, growing old in Hudley, envying other men who had the courage to do what they liked, but never daring to indulge his own fancies—and for what reason? None, except his own inborn feebleness. He could even imagine himself saying, some forty years hence, in extenuation of his own futile life and repressed ambitions: “Of course, that affair with Bertha West ruined me. I’ve never been the same man since. If it hadn’t been for that I might have done something with my life instead of becoming an irritable, futile, unreliable failure.”

“Oh, damn!” said Eustace with fervour.

He descended from the wall and proceeded down the lane at a steady speed. He crossed the bridge, ascended the opposite hill at the same pace, and marched firmly on with an even tread till he reached his home. He inserted his latchkey, finding the hole at the first attempt—a rare feat for him—entered the house, shut the door quietly but without caution, threw his hat on to the hall table, and stalked into the dining-room.

Lizzie and Mrs. Hollins were sitting on either side of the fireplace. Lizzie looked pale and anxious, she sniffed and fidgeted even more than usual. Mrs. Hollins for once was not knitting; her arms were folded across her ample bust, and her harsh features showed traces of tears.

“So there you are!” she said in a tragic tone. “We couldn’t think what had happened to you. And Lizzie so late, too! I’ve been worried to death—about her before she came in, and since then about you.”

“You’ve been at Beech Lea all the time, perhaps?” suggested Lizzie timidly.

“Has a letter come for me?” demanded Eustace, mentally deciding that the fiction of the letter and returned ring must be adhered to for Bertha’s sake.

The two women shook their heads.

“H’m,” said Eustace firmly. “Well, then I’m afraid it must have been stolen. Mother, I have some bad news for you. My engagement with Bertha is broken off.”

"I knew it!" cried Mrs. Hollins in a frenzy. "I guessed it from what Lizzie said. How dare she! Why has she broken it off?"

"She finds that she has made a mistake, that's all," observed Eustace, sitting down and unlacing his shoes. "Pass me my slippers, Liz."

The weeping Lizzie passed him the desired articles with a trembling hand.

"You take it very coolly," raged Mrs. Hollins. "You are a fool, Eustace Hollins, a fool! How can you sit there quietly taking off your shoes! Do you intend to let Bertha go without making one effort to keep her?"

"Yes," said Eustace, looking his mother in the eyes.

Words failed Mrs. Hollins for a time; at length she gasped out: "Tell me how it happened."

"It appears," began Eustace, "that Bertha wrote a letter to me yesterday, breaking off the engagement, and she enclosed the ring."

"What, in an envelope?" asked Mrs. Hollins with fierce contempt.

"Yes," replied Eustace quietly. "And as the letter hasn't turned up, I'm afraid it must have been stolen for the sake of the ring."

"Do you mean to tell me," burst out Mrs. Hollins in incredulous fury, "that the girl didn't even *register* it? Do you mean that the ring's *lost*?" Eustace nodded. His mother's face contorted, and she began to shed slow difficult tears. "The ring you spent your poor little bit of money on?" she said in a shaking voice. "Oh, Eustace! Lost? Of course you'll make inquiries at the post office?"

"Of course," agreed Eustace. "But I'm afraid it is hopeless."

"The Wests ought to give you the money for it," screamed Mrs. Hollins suddenly.

"Mother!" said Eustace in real anger. "How can you——"

"I know, I know," moaned Mrs. Hollins. She gave way completely to her tears.

"Don't cry, mother," Eustace begged her. "I know it's a terrible blow to you."

"You seem to take it very quietly," flared Mrs. Hollins, raising a tear-stained face.

"I think it's all for the best that she found it out now and not after our marriage," hesitated Eustace.

Lizzie burst out shrilly: "I *knew* she was in love with William Irwell."

"I suppose she thinks it will look well, her throwing you over and marrying William Irwell and his half-million," observed Mrs. Hollins with biting sarcasm.

"Mother," commanded Eustace sharply. "You're not to make it difficult for Bertha. She must have gone through a great deal of suffering, and you're not to make her trouble worse by spreading unpleasant remarks about her. To all the people who talk to you about her you must say: 'Of course it has been a terrible blow to all of us, but we all feel that it is far better for poor Bertha to find out her mistake before her marriage than after.'"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Hollins bitterly, much annoyed at this putting of words into her mouth. "I shall say what I please about Miss West."

"You will say what I have suggested," Eustace told her firmly. "It's the only decent and dignified thing to do. After all, it was my engagement, and I've a right to decide what's to be said in public about it. Your private feelings are, of course, your own affair."

Mrs. Hollins looked at him in surprise. Eustace noticed the look and mentally adjured himself: "Keep it up, my boy, you're doing it very well."

Presently Mrs. Hollins began, in a quieter tone:

"I should like to know the truth of what's between her and William Irwell."

"I should think it's extremely probable," said Eustace, choosing his words carefully, "that there was an understanding between Bertha and Irwell long before our engagement, and then somehow it was broken off—perhaps they had a quarrel, I don't know. In any case, please

don't say anything about it. I repeat, I don't wish to make things hard for Bertha."

"You're too good, Eustace," said Lizzie with a sniff. Her beady eyes were fixed upon him in an intensely sympathetic but searching gaze. "Perhaps it would have been better if I hadn't telephoned you from Denbridge."

"On the contrary," replied Eustace in his most melodious tones. He took out the letter which he had received from London that morning, and continued: "If you hadn't telephoned I should have written and despatched a letter refusing this post. As it is I shall accept it." He handed the letter to his mother. "You'd better read it," he said.

Mrs. Hollins read it, her anger rising with every sentence.

"How can you take it?" she stormed. "It's preposterous, Eustace! Look at the salary!"

"I shan't have Bertha to keep," Eustace reminded her quietly. "And I have finished at the Institute."

"I think you must be mad, Eustace, absolutely mad," said Mrs. Hollins, contemptuously tossing the letter back to him. "No wonder Bertha West wouldn't put up with your vagaries." Eustace winced. Perceiving her advantage, Mrs. Hollins continued forcibly: "It's true that your keep here costs more than you pay me for it, but that's all the more reason why you should set seriously to work and begin to earn some money. There's no money in professions like teaching and writing."

"Do you want me to be indebted to the Wests for work?" inquired Eustace scornfully in a louder tone.

"No!" burst out Mrs. Hollins with all the force of her northern pride. The colour rose to her face, her nostrils dilated, her breast heaved. "No, never!" she repeated firmly. "Never!"

"I'm glad we agree about that," said Eustace, touched by the unexpected spirit of her answer. "I shall go to London by the first train to-morrow morning."

"The Wests aren't the only people in Hudley, I sup-

pose," said Mrs. Hollins angrily, annoyed with herself for having played into her son's hands. "You can go into your uncle's business." Seeing obduracy written large upon Eustace's face, she exclaimed: "You are a fool, Eustace, though you're my own son I say it."

"Then let me be a fool in my own way," said Eustace, exasperated. "I like having my own way as much as you do, mother, and this time I mean to have it. You admit that my absence from Hudley will be no detriment to yourself and the girls. If I get on at all well you can come to London and we'll all live together again."

"I shall never leave Hudley," announced Mrs. Hollins solemnly.

"Then Lizzie can come and be my housekeeper," said Eustace half in jest.

"Much house you're ever likely to have!" scoffed Mrs. Hollins.

"You must see, mother," said Eustace with a slight quiver of emotion in his voice, "that it would be extremely painful for me to remain in Hudley just now, when my affairs will be the talk of the town."

Tears came again into Mrs. Hollins's eyes.

"I shall never get over it," she said. "Never. It'll break my heart. I shall hate that girl as long as I live." Eustace made a movement of protest. "How she could be so unkind to you, Eustace, when you're so gentle and good, passes my understanding. Your only fault is you're too gentle and not pushing enough. I hope William Irwell will be a Tartar to her. And you so good and considerate!"

She relapsed into sobs, her maternal pride wounded to the core.

"I'm glad Daisy isn't in," she wept. "Poor child! She'll be so upset!"

Eustace disregarded this statement, the truth of which was doubtful, and continued: "I think I'll catch the seven-thirty train, mother; then I shall be gone before anybody is about. You needn't bother to get up, I can breakfast on the train."

Mrs. Hollins dried her eyes.

"Lizzie," she said in her customary tone of authority, "go upstairs and fetch Eustace's clean flannels down, he'll want them to wear to-morrow, and they must be aired." Lizzie rose obediently. "There's no fire in the kitchen," her mother called after her. "Bring them in here."

The crisis was over. Eustace lighted a pipe and retired into the cold solitude of the drawing-room to write letters. He wrote gratefully to his former master, thanking him for his kindness in mentioning Eustace to his brother; he wrote making an appointment with the editor for the day after to-morrow at eleven "if that day and hour will be convenient to you"; he then proceeded to the more difficult task of writing to Robert West.

"The bald Hudleian style will be the best," decided Eustace, and he wrote:

"Under the present circumstances the suggested business connection between us would, I feel sure, be painful to both of us. I shall always be grateful to you for offering me such an advantageous opening in the commercial world, but perhaps after all it will be better for me to stick to work with which I am familiar. I have therefore decided to take up at once some literary work which has been offered to me in London."

He surveyed this for a minute or two, tried to compose a sentence which would convey in a dignified manner his perfect compliance with Bertha's wishes, decided to leave the note as it was, wrote "*Yours sincerely*," and signed "*Eustace Hollins*" in a satisfied sprawl. A load seemed to roll off his heart as he contemplated the note and its signature; he gave vent to a deep sigh of relief, and rising, went into the other room and read the letter to his mother. Mrs. Hollins, who was disposing Eustace's underwear along the fender, listened with interest and uttered the cryptic remark: "I dare say it's as well after all that you're not going into business," which to Eustace's atten-

tive ear implied a certain criticism of his wording. Disregarding this, however, he took his three letters and slipped out hatless into the street to post them.

He put each letter separately into the friendly red pillar-box, and turning, felt a free man again. The hillside which he had admired from afar now rose up before him, black velvet sprinkled with clear sparkling diamonds. The spring night air was warm and thrilling; from the funnel of a belated steam-lorry thundering crossly down the road flew out red sparks which described captivatingly perfect parabolas over the chassis. The light of a street lamp revealed the engine's name—"Miranda"—on a neat brass plate. Eustace lounged down the street, rejoicing in his recovered ability to take pleasure in common things, of which Bertha and Robert West had recently conspired to rob him.

"I'm my own man again, and can enjoy all these things as I used to do," he thought, and emotions surged in his heart—an intense pity for Bertha and all human beings, stumbling and hurting themselves like children amongst things too hard for them; an intense love, which could forgive any injury and understand any baseness; and the keen poignant joy which belongs to the man who, a failure perhaps in many of life's activities, understands his fellow human beings better than they do themselves, and has a world of his own stored away in his imagination to which he can turn for pleasures richer and more glowing than those the world denies him.

The whim seized Eustace to take a look at Beech Lea; he turned up the Lane, sheltered from inquiring eyes by the darkness, and from without the iron gates surveyed the Wests' mansion. The rhododendrons rustled in the evening breeze; there were lights in the drawing-room and upstairs; in one room, Bertha's, a shadow moved across the lighted blind. Eustace imagined Bertha lying in bed, her long black hair flowing over her pillows, weeping and saying to herself: "If only this awkward business turns out all right, I'll never get myself into such a muddle again," and he shrewdly surmised that she would con-

tinue to say it at intervals throughout her life. It came into his heart to feel a trifle sorry for William Irwell.

The light vanished.

"Thank God I'm not inside that house!" said Eustace soberly, and went home to bed.

2.

Next morning Lizzie tapped on Eustace's door at five o'clock, and then went down to prepare his breakfast. Eustace awoke from a sound dreamless sleep into a bright May morning, dressed, and began to put his papers together; in sorting out his untidy drawers he came upon the blue velvet case which held the chain he had intended to give Bertha. He winced, then shrugged his shoulders and put the thing in his pocket. Presently he was ready, and went downstairs. He heard Lizzie moving about in the kitchen, and went in to her.

"You shouldn't have bothered to get up, Liz," he told her. "See here——" he put the velvet case into her hand. "It was for Bertha, but I should like you to have it."

"Oh, Eustace!" said poor Lizzie, embarrassed between pleasure and grief. Tears stood in her eyes.

"You're not to worry about me, Lizzie," said Eustace firmly. "It's all for the best." He thought of hinting that his passion for Bertha had never been as great as she had imagined, but felt that it would not be decent to do so, and turned away. "At least I know now exactly what it feels like to be intimately concerned in a scandal," he told himself grimly. "That should be useful information for a writer of fiction."

To his surprise his mother was in the dining-room, red-eyed, but fully dressed even to her boots.

"Why, mother!" he said.

"I thought I should like to go to the station with you," announced Mrs. Hollins. "I doubt if I could walk all the way, but the trams will be running, I dare say."

"I'll go up to that place in Prince's Road and see if I can get a taxi," suggested Eustace.

He set off at once, and was successful in his errand; a man was already at the garage, cleaning down his car; he had another customer to take to the seven-thirty train, but would call for Eustace if he did not mind going rather early.

Eustace returned to Derwent Terrace and ate a small breakfast. Daisy, looking frightened, came downstairs in a dressing-gown, her fair hair hanging in untidy wisps about her ears; she kissed Eustace and shivered and shed a few tears, and promised to write to him regularly—which promise of course she did not keep—and was then urged back to bed again. The taxi came, and Eustace's battered luggage was placed upon it; Mrs. Hollins was assisted into the vehicle, Lizzie followed, and Eustace wrestled ineffectively with the spring of a turn-up seat. The party drove almost silently through the still quiet streets, occasionally uttering the stiff stilted remarks which precede a much-felt parting and which express so little of the speaker's full heart.

The train—two carriages which would be hooked on to an express at Sheffield—was already standing in the station. Eustace secured a seat, and Mrs. Hollins climbed into the carriage and sat facing him, while Lizzie fidgeted restlessly up and down the platform. Eustace bent forward to his mother.

"Now, mother," he began earnestly, "I want you to promise me something."

"What?" asked Mrs. Hollins guardedly.

"Promise me you won't say hard things about Bertha," said Eustace. Privately he thought: "But for her and this catastrophe I should never have had the strength of mind to get away from Hudley. I owe her my escape."

Mrs. Hollins set her lips and was silent.

"Promise me, mother," urged Eustace. "Your saying cruel things won't do anybody any good, and it might do Bertha a great deal of harm, and spoil her life. I bear her no ill-will, so I don't see why you should. It's so much more dignified to be courteous and restrained."

“It’s all very well for you, you’re going away ; we shall have to stay in **H**udley and face it out,” said Mrs. Hollins. Seeing the trouble on Eustace’s face, she added : “Not that I wish you to stay . . .” Her voice shook with the effort required to utter these words of self-sacrifice. “I’ll promise what you want about Bertha,” she went on with a kind of desperate generosity. “But I shall always hate her. Always. Don’t ask me to do anything else.”

Eustace looked distressed, but said nothing.

The time for the train’s departure approached ; other passengers appeared, luggage was put in, the scene became animated. Mrs. Hollins descended heavily to the platform. Tickets were inspected, and the carriage doors closed. Eustace wished the minutes to hasten ; he wanted to be out of Hudley, out of the humiliation of his affair with Bertha, and into the glorious world beyond. Above him on the rack lay an old bag which held among other things the incomplete manuscript of his first book. When he should be safely out of Yorkshire he would take it down and look it over—perhaps even write a few lines. To him the time of waiting seemed long. To Lizzie, too, and Mrs. Hollins, standing on the platform in the bright spring sunshine which mocked their grief, every breath they drew seemed to bring with it the suffering of years. A train standing at a neighbouring platform began to blow off steam, and the excruciating noise, drowning Eustace’s farewells, seemed the climax of torture.

The guard consulted his watch and waved his green flag. The engine snorted, moved, whistled, puffed along the platform, and drew out of the station. Eustace leaned out of the window and waved to the watching women. The train vanished round the curve.

Lizzie wept unrestrainedly, but Mrs. Hollins’s face was dark and set. As she limped towards the entrance on her daughter’s arm, her thought, fierce, unjust, but enduring, was :

“God punish Bertha West for driving my only son away from me.”

CHAPTER XVI

CONCLUSION

EIGHTEEN months later, in a chapel lavishly decorated with palms, aspidistras, chrysanthemums, a striped awning over the entrance, and an incredible number of yards of red carpet on the ground, with all the éclat conferred by the presence of a famous officiating minister, a special organist, singers hired from Leeds for the occasion, six bridesmaids, two hundred invited guests, and a veil of old lace lent by Sir Melfield Huntley, Bertha married William Irwell.

Eustace sent from London as a wedding present a small but beautiful lustre bowl, which came in handy to support the lid of a large canteen of knives presented by Mr. Irvine.

The report of the wedding festivities filled three columns of the *Hudley News*.

THE END

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